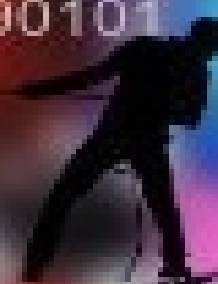
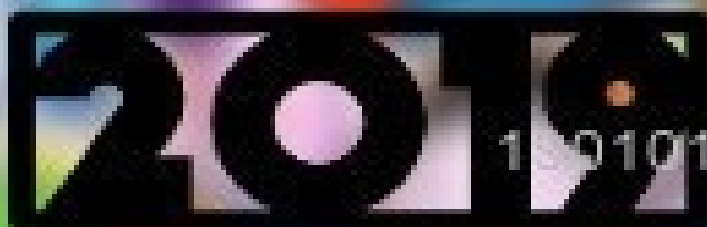




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US Study: Work in Space Does Not Seem to Shorten Astronauts' Lives

By George Grow
31 December, 2018

Astronauts traveling in space meet forms of radiation that are uncommon on Earth.

Some of this radiation has been shown to be harmful to human health. It is linked to cancers and heart problems.

Yet a new American study suggests the radiation does not shorten astronauts' lives.

Researchers studied nearly 60 years of health records and other data about male astronauts from the United States. They then compared this data to information about a group of men who are in good health, richer than most Americans and receive good healthcare: **professional athletes**.

The study found that neither group has higher rates of dying at a young age. In fact, both groups generally live longer than other Americans.

Astronauts are usually well-educated, earn more money and are in better physical condition than the average American. Some earlier research has linked being an astronaut to a lower risk of early death, the researchers noted.

The findings were reported in the publication *Occupational & Environmental Medicine*.



NASA astronaut Ricky Arnold does some filming on the International Space Station Oct. 3, 2018

Much of the existing research on **mortality** rates in astronauts has not yet explore the mental and physical demands of this job. There also has not been a lot of research on whether astronauts show what is known as the "healthy worker effect".

This effect leads people with employment of any kind to have fewer medical problems than individuals who are unable to work, said Robert Reynolds. He was a member of the study team.

Reynolds said, "The **challenge** has always been to understand if astronauts are as healthy as they would be had they been otherwise comparably employed but had never gone to space at all." He added, "To do this, we needed to find a group that is comparable on several important **factors**."

He said there was no similar study about people who had been in space.

His comments were included in an email sent to the Reuters news agency.

Comparing astronauts to baseball, basketball players

The researchers compared mortality for male U.S. astronauts to active or former players from Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). These men played professionally between 1960 and the middle of 2018.

Both the players and astronauts had a lower risk of dying young than the general population, the study found. And there was no difference between the death rates of NBA and MLB players.

Astronauts were more likely to die of accidents, and less likely to die from heart disease and all other natural causes, the study also found.

The results suggest that being in contact with radiation in space might not lead to an early death for astronauts because of heart problems or cancers. In fact, astronauts had a lower rate of death from heart disease than the NBA and MLB players, and had cancer death rates similar to those of the athletes.



FILE - Cleveland Cavaliers' LeBron James, left, drives to the basket against Boston Celtics' Terry Rozier in the second half of Game 3 of the NBA basketball Eastern Conference finals Saturday, May 19, 2018, in Cleveland.

The study was not designed to prove whether or how space travel may directly affect human health. It also did not examine mortality rates among female astronauts or athletes.

Radiation exposure may also have been much lower during early flights to the moon, said researcher Francis Cucinotta.

Astronauts usually never smoked, leading to a lower risk of heart disease than the general population, he said. Cucinotta is with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and was not involved in the study.

Diet and physical exercise also set astronauts and professional athletes apart from the rest of the population, said Michael Delp. He is a researcher with Florida State University in Tallahassee.

He said a job requiring physical fitness can add to the healthy worker effect.

Even for other people, Delp said, "remaining or becoming physically active and maintaining a well-balanced diet greatly improves **overall** health and wellbeing,

and can **enhance** successful aging."

I'm Ashley Thompson. And I'm Jonathan Evans.

Lisa Rapaport reported this story for the Reuters news agency. George Grow adapted her report for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter Jr. was the editor.

Words in This Story

athlete - *n.* someone who plays one or more sports or who is active in physical exercise

professional - *adj.* related to or involving payment for one's work

mortality - *n.* related to the number of deaths that happen in a time, place or other condition

factor - *n.* a fact or influence that leads to a result

challenge - *n.* a test or dispute of some kind

overall - *adv.* in all parts; taken as a whole

enhance - *v.* to increase or improve

We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section.

Vacation Spots Offer 'Extras' For Disconnecting Phones

By George Grow
31 December, 2018

Are you able to take a vacation from your wireless device?

A growing number of hotels will help you to find out.

Some hotels are offering "extras," like food and underwater diving, to people who agree give up their cellphones for a few hours. Other hotels have phone-free hours in their swimming areas. A few are even banning electronic devices from public places altogether.

Hotels that limit cellphone use risk losing publicity on social media services such as Instagram or Facebook. But they say their policies reflect their aim of **promoting** wellness, fun and recreation. And, they hope that hotel **guests** will enjoy their experience and return for future visits.

"Everyone wants to be able to disconnect. They just need a little **courage**," said Lisa Checchio. She is chief marketing officer at Wyndham Hotel Group.

People's inability to disconnect is an increasingly serious issue. Half of cellphone users spend between three and seven hours a day on their mobile devices. That information comes from a 2017 study by Counterpoint Research, a technology advisory service.

A separate study by the non-profit group Common Sense Media found that 69 percent of parents and 78 percent of young people said they used their devices at least hourly.

Wyndham hotel officials said they had to ask for more chairs for all the people who would sit in them and look at their phones. The hotel company found that the average guest was bringing three devices and activating them once every 12 minutes 'xc3'xa2'xc2'x80'xc2'x94 or about 80 times a day.



Adam Bryan and his son Wesley work together on puzzles included in complimentary backpacks provided with other incentives by the Wyndham Grand Hotel in Chicago on Dec. 1, 2018. (AP Photo/Teresa Crawford)

Ways hotels keep guests device-free

Last October, Wyndham Grand's five U.S. vacation **resorts** began offering "rewards" to guests who agreed to put away their phones for a few hours.

In exchange for leaving the phone in a soft, protected **pouch**, guests get good seating by swimming pools, free food and even chances to win return visits. The devices stay with the guests, but only hotel employees can open the secure pouch.

The Associated Press reported last week that 250 people have taken part in the program at Wyndham resort hotels in Florida and Texas.

Wyndham Grand resorts offered to cut the cost of a hotel stay by five percent if guests put their phones in a timed lockbox. The hotels provide treats, bedtime books and instant cameras for adults and children who are not sure what to do with all their newfound free time.

The idea appealed to Matthew Cannata. He heads public relations for the New Britain, Connecticut, schools. He worried about the effect of technology on his two young children, and he wants to keep devices out of sight during family meals.

"Any chance I can get to put the phone away is great. Sometimes, people need to be forced to do things to start a thought process and then create a **habit**," he said.

Hotel workers at the Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit in Mexico will remove all electronic devices from your room and replace them with traditional games, like

chess.

Guests at a nearby resort trade in their phones for a bracelet placed around the wrist. The device gives them the right to take part in special activities like diving. They must do at least four activities to earn back their phones. A timer in the hotel shows how long each family has remained without their devices.

Miraval is a resort in Arizona owned by Hyatt Hotels Corporation. Miraval's goal is to increase mindfulness and create a sense of calm among their guests. Miraval, which will soon open two more resorts in Texas and Massachusetts, bans phone use in most public areas. Guests are told to put their phones into soft cotton bags and leave them on small wooden beds in their rooms.

Some resorts want a total ban on electronic devices. Wilderness Resorts, an African **tour** operator, provides no internet service at many of its camps. A 40-room hotel at the Siwa Oasis in Egypt lets guests have phones in their rooms, but there is no internet service or even electricity.

However, not all vacationers want to be separated from their devices. Phones can serve as cameras, music players, travel guides and e-readers. They also might be needed in an emergency.

Communications manager David Bruns uses two phones. He tries not to use his work phone when he is not on the job, but he carries his personal phone everywhere.

"I don't think I would like being made to put the thing down," Bruns said. "It feels like that is more about me being told what to do by people I am paying to do something for me."

Ayana Resort and Spa in Bali, Indonesia, understands that, so it tries to meet guests halfway. Its winding River Pool bans phones for eight hours every day. But it invites guests to take photographs and publish on social media at other times.

I'm Anna Matteo.

I'm George Grow.

Dee-Ann Durbin reported this story for the Associated Press. George Grow

adapted her report for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter Jr. was the editor.

We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section.

Words in This Story

promote - *v.* to help bring into being

guest - *n.* someone who pays for the services of a business, such as a hotel

courage - *n.* bravery

resort - *adj.* of or related to a getaway for vacations or recreation

pouch - *n.* a small bag or container carried on the person

habit - *n.* a normal behavior; a tradition or custom

tour - *n.* trip

New Years Traditions Around the World

By Anna Matteo
31 December, 2017

Hello and welcome to VOA Learning English.

Most of us here in the United States are celebrating the coming of a New Year. At **the stroke of midnight** on January 1, we rang in 2018!

Many cultures follow different calendars and celebrate the New Year at different times. The Lunar New Year is one example.

No matter when you celebrate, there are many traditions around the world for ringing in the New Year.

Here is a look at a few of them:

Chasing away bad luck

Many cultures have traditions meant to scare off demons and bad luck. This often involves using fire or loud noises - or both - often in the form of fireworks!

But there are other ways people do it, too.

In Scotland, for example, people hold bonfire celebrations. And men from villages walk through the streets swinging giant blazing fireballs over their heads. These fireballs represent the sun and they are supposed to clean the coming year.



A woman takes part in the Hogmanay (New Year) street party celebrations in Edinburgh, Scotland, January 1, 2014. (REUTERS/Russell Cheyne)

In Panama, people use **bonfires** to burn likenesses of popular celebrities and political figures. These doll-like **effigies** represent the old year. Burning them brings a **fresh start** for the New Year.

Of course, some traditions meant to avoid bad luck do not involve fire at all.

For example, just before the New Year, people in Denmark find the highest surface they can and jump from it as the New Year starts. This is so they can jump into January! The hope is that they leave behind the bad spirits and bad luck of the previous and enter a New Year full of promise and new beginnings.

Some Finnish people like to drop **molten tin** into cold water. Then they look at the shape and try to figure out meaning from it. For example, if it looks like a train, perhaps the New Year will bring travel. If it looks similar to a heart, perhaps it means the New Year will be filled love and romance!

Food for good luck

Many cultures have certain foods that are said to bring good luck.

In the southern part of the United States, people often eat black-eyed peas and pork for good luck in the New Year. In other parts of the U.S., people eat sauerkraut with pork sausage on New Year's Day.

In Spain and some other countries, as the clock strikes midnight, people eat 12 grapes. These 12 grapes represent the 12 months of the year. And eating them all in the first 12 seconds of the New Year guarantees that the year will be filled with good luck.

In the Philippines, many people eat and display 12 round fruits to bring them a **prosperous** year.

And in Japan, people eat soba noodles on New Year's Eve. While they eat they try not to break the long noodles -- which represent **longevity**.

Clothing traditions

To start the New Year off on the right foot, many people like to wear new clothing. But some traditions take it a step farther than that.

In Japan, for example, people who believe in Buddhism may dress up like the zodiac animal for the coming year. Then they go to a temple to, **literally**, ring in the New Year. At Buddhist temples, monks will ring a bell 108 times, one for each humanly sin.

Man Leaves \$11 Million Surprise Gift to Children's Groups

By Pete Musto
01 January, 2019

Alan Naiman was known for being very careful about how he spent his money. But even those closest to him had no knowledge of the **fortune** he quietly gathered and the last act he had planned.

Naiman died of cancer at age 63 last January. The man from the American state of Washington gave most of his money to groups that help the poor, sick, disabled and **abandoned** children.

He gave them \$11 million.

The large amount of his fortune shocked the groups that received his gifts and even his best friends.

That is because Naiman had been known to repair his own shoes with **duct tape**. He had sought deals to buy food from **grocery stores** at closing time and had taken friends out to lunch at low cost restaurants.

Naiman died unmarried and childless. He loved children but also was intensely private, his friends say. He saved, invested and worked extra jobs to gather money. He rarely spent the money on himself after seeing how unfair life could be for children who suffer the most.

His friends believe a lifelong desire to help his older brother who had a developmental disability influenced Naiman. Yet he rarely spoke of it. His brother died in 2013.

His close friend Susan Madsen told the Associated Press, "Growing up as a kid with an older, disabled brother kind of **colored** the way he looked at things."

A former banker, Naiman worked for the past 20 years at the state Department of

Social and Health Services. He earned \$67,234 a year and also took on side jobs. Sometimes, he worked as many as three at a time.

He saved and invested enough to make several millions of dollars. He also received millions more from his parents after they died, said Shashi Karan, a friend from his banking days.

Naiman was pleased when he was able to make use of the reduced prices many companies and organization offer older people. He bought his clothes from large self-service stores. He loved cars, but for most of his life, he drove worn-out vehicles.

After Naiman's death, Karan recognized how little he knew about his longtime friend. "I don't know if he was lonely. I think he was a **loner**," Karan said.



In this Friday, Dec. 21, 2018, photo, from left, Rebecca Schaechter, Nicole Herron and Rachel Herron fold and sort donated clothes at Treehouse, a nonprofit organization in Seattle that serves the needs of children in the foster-care system. The charity w

Many of the organizations that received Naiman's gifts said they did not know him, although they had crossed paths.

He left \$2.5 million to the Pediatric Interim Care Center in Washington. The center is a private organization that cares for babies born to mothers who abused drugs and children with drug dependency.

Naiman had called the center about a newborn baby while working for the state more than 10 years ago. Barbara Drennen, who established the center, said, "We would never dream that something like this would happen to us. I wish very much that I could have met him. I would have loved to have had him see the babies he's protecting."

The center used the money to pay off its **mortgage** and buy a new vehicle to **transport** the children.

Naiman gave \$900,000 to the Treehouse, a **foster care** organization. He had brought children in his care to the group's house, where children without parents can choose toys and necessities for free.

Treehouse is using Naiman's money to expand its college and career support services statewide. Jessica Ross, who works with Treehouse, commented that Naiman's savings and cost cutting were for this purpose.

She called it a "pure demonstration of **philanthropy** and love."

Sally Ho reported this story for the Associated Press. Pete Musto adapted this story for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

We want to hear from you. What kinds of groups would you donate to if you had millions of dollars? Write to us in the Comments Section or on 51VOA.COM.

Words in This Story

fortune - *n.* a very large amount of money

abandoned - *adj.* left without needed protection or care

duct tape - *n.* a wide, sticky, and usually silver tape that is made of cloth and that is used especially to repair things

grocery store(s) - *n.* a store that sells food and household supplies

color(ed) - *v.* to change someone's ideas, opinion, or attitude in some way

loner - *n.* a person who is often alone or who likes to be alone

mortgage - *n.* legal agreement in which a person borrows money to buy property, such as a house, and pays back the money over a period of years

foster care - *n.* a situation in which for a period of time a child lives with and is cared for by people who are not the child's parents

transport - *v.* to carry (someone or something) from one place to another

philanthropy - *n.* the practice of giving money and time to help make life better for other people

US Native American Museum Welcomes Artists from Americas

By Jonathan Evans
01 January, 2019

Visitors to the U.S. National **Museum** of the American Indian recently had a chance to buy artwork made by some of the world's finest Native American artists.

The handmade objects included jewelry and clothing, as well as paintings and statues. They were offered to the public as part of a two-day Native Art Market at the museum's headquarters, in Washington, D.C.

One artist at the event was Porfirio Gutierrez. His ancestors belonged to the Zapotecs, an ancient group of people that lived in what is now southern Mexico.

Gutierrez says he and his family create handwoven cloth by using the same methods as their ancestors. He describes the resulting textiles as "functional art," influenced by the natural world.

"These ways of making colors and making an **authentic** piece, it's disappearing. So I feel like I need to **contribute** into the **preservation**, and the only way to preserve it is to actually employ these old ways of making the arts."

Gutierrez's work was among the hundreds of objects on sale at the Native American art event. They represent traditional and modern works by more than 30 Native artists from across North America.

Like Gutierrez, many of the artists said that nature is a big influence on their artwork.

For example, Jhane Myers uses teeth and bones from animals for some of her jewelry.

"Each elk has two ivory teeth, so I do these necklaces, and then I also have

buffalo bone beads. I try to use all the same items that we used as a traditional Native people 200 years ago."



A closer look at one of Kathleen Wall's ceramic dolls. (J.Taboh/VOA)

Artist Kathleen Wall uses clay from the ground around Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico to make dolls. She paints one doll at a time, giving each one a peaceful facial expression.

The National Museum of the American Indian has been holding the art market each year since 2006.

Hayes Lavis is head of cultural arts at the museum. He says he hopes visitors leave with a better understanding of Native people in the Americas.

"What we're hoping that people will take away from this experience is just a realization of the contributions of Native people to the Americas. They were here first, they've always been here, they've gone through a lot of **adversity** and they are still **thriving**, strong, creative cultures."

I'm Jonathan Evans.

Julie Taboh reported this story for VOA News. Jonathan Evans adapted her report for Learning English. George Grow was the editor.

Words in This Story

adversity - *n.* a difficult situation or condition; misfortune or tragedy

contribute - *v.* to give something, such as money, goods, or time to help a person, group, cause, or organization

thriving - *adj.* growing or developing successfully

preservation - *n.* the act of keeping something valuable alive or free from damage; protection

authentic - *adj.* based on fact; realistic

museum - *n.* a center set up for the care, study and demonstration of objects of lasting value

Andrew Jackson Takes on the Bank of the US



From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember. This week we continue the story of the presidency of Andrew Jackson.

Jackson took office in 1829. He was popular with many voters. They saw him as the symbol of the common man. But Jackson's first term seemed to be mostly a political battle with his vice president, John C. Calhoun.

As his presidency went on, another struggle began. This time, it was Jackson against the Bank of the United States.

Andrew Jackson Took on the Bank of the United States

The First Bank of the United States had closed in 1811. But without a central bank, the country's finances had suffered during the War of 1812.

So in 1816, Congress provided money to establish the Second Bank of the United States. The bank could provide loans, pay bills, collect taxes and move money around the country.



Andrew Jackson

Congress gave the bank a charter to do business for 20 years. The government owned one-fifth of the bank. A small group of private citizens owned the rest. Lawmakers gave the bank enormous power.

The Bank of the United States had \$35 million in capital. Some of that money came from the government. Most came from investors.

Historian Bray Hammond notes that at the time, the Bank of the United States was the richest corporation in the world.

The Bank of the United States also printed the country's paper money. And it was the only bank permitted to have offices across the nation.

By making it easy or difficult for businesses to borrow money, the bank's owners could control the economy in almost any part of the United States.

"What this means is that you are granting -- and Congress did grant -- exclusive privileges to the Bank of the United States, which meant exclusive money-making opportunities to its stockholders."

Historian Daniel Feller explains that the Bank of the United States helped the government to do its business effectively and efficiently. But it also helped the people who owned stock in the bank.



Nicholas Biddle

During Jackson's presidency, a man named Nicholas Biddle led the Bank of the United States. Biddle was an extremely intelligent man. He had completed his studies at the University of Pennsylvania when he was only 13 years old. When he was 18, he was sent to Paris as secretary to the American minister.

During America's war with Britain in 1812, Biddle helped establish the Bank of the United States. He became its president when he was only 37 years old.

Biddle clearly understood his power as president of the Bank of the United States. In his mind, the government had no right to interfere in any way with the bank's business.

President Jackson did not agree. Nor was he very friendly toward the bank. Not many people from western states were. They did not trust the bank's paper money. They wanted to deal in gold and silver.

Jackson criticized the bank in each of his yearly messages to Congress. He said the Bank of the United States was dangerous to the liberty of the people. He said the bank could build up or pull down political parties through loans to politicians.

Jackson opposed giving the bank a new charter. He proposed that a new bank be

formed as part of the Treasury Department.

Jackson Vetoed a new Charter Approved by the Senate

The president urged Congress to consider the future of the bank long before the bank's charter was to end in 1836. Then, if the charter was rejected, the bank could close its business slowly over several years. Changing the banking system slowly, Jackson said, would prevent serious economic problems for the country.

But the bank's president wanted to renew the charter early. He made the request in January 1832 — nine months before the next presidential election.

Jackson's opponent, Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, was sure that the issue of the bank could win him some votes. Clay argued his case on the floor of the Senate for three days. He strongly urged the Senate to renew the bank's charter. He said the country was in the middle of a revolution, not yet a bloody revolution. But things were happening that pointed to a total change of the pure republican character of the government. Power was being centered in the hands of one man, he said. He meant President Jackson.

Clay added that if Congress did not act, the government would fail. Clay then asked the Senate to condemn Jackson, saying he violated the Constitution and the nation's laws. The Senate approved the resolution.

The chief opponent to the bank was Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. He objected to the renewal of the charter, he told the Senate, because the bank was too great and powerful and made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

The Senate finally voted on the bank's new charter. The vote was 28 for renewal and 20 against. The House voted three weeks later. It also approved the charter, 107 to 85.

The lawmakers sent the bill to the White House. President Jackson debated it with members of his cabinet. Some wanted to negotiate a compromise. But Jackson decided to veto the bill in the strongest possible language.

On July 10, 1832, Jackson sent a message to Congress explaining his reasoning. Jackson said he did not believe the bank's charter was constitutional.

Jackson also spoke of the way the bank moved money from West to East. He said the bank was owned by a small group of rich men, mostly in the East. Some of the owners, he said, were foreigners. Much of the bank's business was done in the West. The money paid by westerners for loans went into the pockets of the eastern bankers. Jackson said this was wrong. Then the president spoke of his firm belief in the rights of the common man.

"It is to be regretted," he said, "that the rich and powerful bend the acts of the government to their own purposes."

Jackson said that instead, the government should shower its favors — as heaven does its rain — on the high and low alike, on the rich and the poor equally.

Jackson's veto of the bank bill may have cost him votes among the wealthy, but it earned him votes among the common people, like farmers and laborers. He easily won re-election in November of 1832. Martin Van Buren became his vice president.

Historian Daniel Feller says Jackson believed his victory meant that Americans supported his policies, including the bank veto.

"He had a very popular personal image. It's possible he would've been re-elected by the same margin or larger anyway. The one thing we can say looking forward is that when, later on, you had somebody carrying on Jackson's policies absolutely faithfully, without Jackson's personal charisma, he proved to be not nearly so popular."

Jackson Triumphed as Biddle Blamed for Financial Panic

In his second term, Jackson stopped putting federal money into the Bank of the United States. Instead, he put the money into state banks.

The bank president, Nicholas Biddle, fought with all his power to keep the bank open. He demanded that borrowers immediately repay their loans. Businesses struggled without the bank's assistance. Workers lost their jobs.

Biddle blamed President Jackson for the financial panic. And critics of Jackson's bank policy called him "King Andrew the First." But as time passed, business people began to see that the Bank of the United States was being much tighter in

its money policy than was necessary. They began to feel that it was the bank's president — not Jackson — who was responsible for the serious economic situation in the country.

Biddle took no responsibility for the financial crisis.

He then made a very bad decision. Biddle asked the governor of Pennsylvania to make a speech supporting the bank. At the same time, Biddle refused to lend the state of Pennsylvania \$300,000.

The governor was furious. Instead of making a speech supporting the bank, he made one that sharply criticized it.

Two days later, the governor of New York proposed that the state sell \$4 or \$5 million of stock for loans to help state banks. The New York legislature approved selling even more.

Strengthening state banks helped break the power of the Bank of the United States. Nicholas Biddle began to see that the battle was lost. He started making more loans to businesses. The economic panic slowly ended.

Jackson's victory over the Bank of the United States was clear. Biddle started to lose the support of many members of Congress. In the House of Representatives, James Polk proposed four resolutions about the bank. One said the bank should not get a new charter in 1836.

The second resolution said government money should not be deposited in the bank. The third said the government should continue to put its money in state banks. And the fourth proposed an investigation of the bank and the reasons for the economic panic in the country. All four of these anti-bank resolutions were approved.

One of Biddle's aides described the feelings of bank officials. This day, he said, should be ripped from the history of the republic. He said the president of the United States had seized the public treasury and the representatives of the people had approved it.

Jackson won what he himself considered a glorious triumph.

Another major event in Jackson's second term was the situation in Texas. The struggle over Texas and the Battle of the Alamo will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for The Making of a Nation — American history from VOA Learning English.

We are sorry, but this feature is currently not available

0001 Introducing Yourself

Complete Transcript

Welcome to Daily English 1 - Introducing Yourself.

This is Daily English number 1. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

This episode is a story about me, introducing vocabulary you need to talk about yourself. Let's get started.

[start of story]

Let me tell you a little about myself.

I was born and raised in Minnesota and I'm a native of the city of Saint Paul. I grew up there with my parents and my eight brothers and two sisters. I'm the eleventh child, so you could say I'm the baby of the family, but I swear I wasn't spoiled.

That's right, I'm part of a big family, probably the biggest family in the neighborhood, perhaps the biggest family in the state!

I had a happy childhood, for the most part. My father and mother didn't have a lot of money, but because they both worked hard, we never felt deprived.

I wasn't much interested in sports, like my brothers were. I enjoyed reading and listening to music while growing up. I went to grade school near my house, and then to high school about two miles away from our home.

After graduating from high school, I went on to the University of Minnesota for my bachelor's degree. It took me a while to learn the ropes at the university, but I finally graduated about six years later. Better late than never, as my father used to say.

I then went to Mexico for a couple of years to teach English and to study Spanish. When I returned, I decided to become a teacher, so I went back to school to get my master's degree. After teaching high school for a few years, I was offered a job in California, so I moved to Los Angeles in 1991. After working here for a few years, I went back to school (again!) to get my Ph.D. I was starting to become a professional student.

Well, I completed my Ph.D. in four years and then taught at the university for several years. Now I work at a small research organization here in Los Angeles. I am happily married, and I still enjoy reading and listening to music, and of course, creating ESLPod.com lessons.

[end of story]

Our story begins by me saying, "Let me tell you a little about myself." I'm going to give you some information about me. I start by saying, "I was born and raised in Minnesota." "To be born" (born) means, of course, to come out of your mother, to be separated from your mother's body. "To be raised" (raised) means to be cared for as a child until you are an adult. We might also use the phrasal verb "to be brought (brought) up." You may, for example, be "born" in one city and "raised" in another, if your parents moved soon after you were born.

In the story I say, "I was born and raised in Minnesota." Minnesota is a state in the north-central part of the U.S. on the border of Canada. I continue by saying that I am a "native" (native) of the city of St. Paul. A "native" is a person born in a specific place. I am a native of St. Paul because that's the city where I was born. I could also say, "I'm a native of Minnesota," because I was born in the state of Minnesota. I could say, "I'm a native of the United States," because I was born in the United States. So, depending on what place you want to use, you can say you are a "native" of that particular place.

Well, I was a native of St. Paul. I grew up there with my parents and my eight brothers and two sisters. I say then, "I am the eleventh child, so you could say" - that is, you could call me - "the baby of the family." The "baby" (baby) here means the youngest person in the family, or the youngest child of your parents. We call that person "the baby of the family." The word "baby" usually refers to a child from the time he is born until maybe two or three years old, but if someone says, "he's the baby of the family" or "she's the baby of the family," he means that person is the youngest of the family. We would say the youngest "sibling"

(sibling). Your "siblings" are your brothers and sisters.

Now, in many families, the baby of the family is "spoiled." "To be spoiled" (spoiled) is to get whatever you want and often to not behave very well, especially if you're a child. If parents spoil their children, the children get whatever they want, and because of that, they often don't behave or act like they should. They don't act politely. Well, I was not spoiled even though I was the youngest, or baby of the family.

"That's right," I say, "I'm part of a big family, probably the biggest family in the neighborhood." A "neighborhood" is an area inside of the city where you live. Most cities have several neighborhoods or areas. I say that "I had a happy childhood." Your "childhood" (childhood) refers to the period during which you were growing up, from the time you were a baby until you became an adult or perhaps a teenager - 13, 14, and so forth. That's your "childhood." Some people have a happy childhood. Some people have a sad childhood.

I say that my childhood was happy "for the most part." That expression "for the most part" means mainly or in most cases - or in this case, perhaps the majority of the time. Sometimes, of course, my childhood was not happy, but usually it was. I explain that my mother and father "did not have a lot of money" - they were not rich - "but they both worked hard," meaning they worked a lot. Because they worked a lot, they had enough money to give us what we needed as children. Therefore, or because of that, we never, I say, "felt deprived" (deprived). "To feel deprived" means to not have everything you need to be happy, not have the things that you want to have in order to have a good life.

I say that "I wasn't much interested in sports." I didn't like playing sports, but my brothers did. I instead "enjoyed reading and listening to music while growing up." I say that "I went to grade school near my house." "Grade (grade) school" is also called, in the U.S., "elementary school." It's the first five to eight years of a child's education, depending on the school. Sometimes these are also called, in certain areas, "grammar school," although that isn't a term as commonly used now as it was, say, 50 years ago. We usually refer to grade schools as elementary schools, nowadays.

I then went on to high school, which in the U.S. is normally grades 9 through 12, though it might be grades 10 through 12 depending on the school system. My high school was grades 9 through 12. "After graduating" - that is, after

completing high school - "I went on to the University of Minnesota for my bachelor's degree." "To go on to" means to move to the next level - in this case, the next level of my education, which was college or the university. I went to the University of Minnesota for my "bachelor's (bachelor's) degree (degree)." A "degree" is a certificate or recognition of study at a certain school. A "bachelor's degree" is given after typically four years of study at a college or university.

I say that, "It took me a while" - that is, a long time - "to learn the ropes (ropes) at the university." The expression "to learn the ropes" is an idiom meaning to learn how things are done in a certain group or organization, or to learn how to do a certain kind of job. In this case, I was learning how things worked at the university. I say that "I finally graduated," or completed my studies, "about six years later." That is, instead of taking the normal four years at university, I took six years because, well, I'm just not very smart.

I then say, "Better late than never." The expression "Better late than never" means it is better to do something, even if you don't do it quickly, as long as you are able to complete it or finish it. So, my father used to say, "Better late than never" about my university studies because it took me so long to finish, but I did in fact finish. Well, at least my bachelor's degree. "I then went to Mexico for a couple of years to teach English and to study Spanish."

"When I returned, I decided to become a teacher, so I went back to school" - that is, I returned to the university - "to get my master's degree." A "master's (master's) degree" is a one, sometimes two-year degree that is given for studying about a certain topic after you complete your bachelor's, or typically four-year, degree. A "bachelor's degree" is sometimes called an "undergraduate degree," and a "master's degree" is a graduate degree.

There are actually two graduate degrees that are common. One is a "master's degree," done immediately after or at least at some point after finishing your bachelor's degree. There's also a "doctoral" or "doctorate degree." That takes longer. There are many different kinds of graduate degrees, however, but "master's" and "doctorate," which we also call a "Ph.D.," are the most common graduate degrees.

"After teaching high school," I say, "I was offered a job in California," which is true, "and I moved here in 1991. After working here for a few years, I went back to school again to get my Ph.D." A "Ph.D.," as I mentioned, is a graduate degree.

It usually takes somewhere between four and seven years to complete. After you get your Ph.D., you can be called "Doctor." "I started becoming a professional student," I say.

I then finish by saying that "I completed my Ph.D. in four years and then taught at the university for several years." I taught at a couple of different colleges after I got my Ph.D. "Now I work at a small research organization." "Research" (research) is used to describe efforts to learn more about something, either in a scientific or other disciplined way. I work at a research organization here in Los Angeles.

I say, "I am happily married." "To be married" (married) means to have a husband or a wife. "I am happily married, and I still enjoy reading and listening to music, as well as, of course, making these ESLPod.com lessons."

Now let's listen to the story again, this time at a normal speed.

[start of story]

Let me tell you a little about myself.

I was born and raised in Minnesota and I'm a native of the city of Saint Paul. I grew up there with my parents and my eight brothers and two sisters. I'm the eleventh child so you could say I'm the baby of the family, but I swear I wasn't spoiled.

That's right, I'm part of a big family, probably the biggest family in the neighborhood, perhaps the biggest family in the state!

I had a happy childhood, for the most part. My father and mother didn't have a lot of money, but because they both worked hard, we never felt deprived.

I wasn't much interested in sports, like my brothers were. I enjoyed reading and listening to music while growing up. I went to grade school near my house, and then to high school about two miles away from our home.

After graduating from high school, I went on to the University of Minnesota for my bachelor's degree. It took me a while to learn the ropes at the university, but I finally graduated about six years later. Better late than never, as my father used

to say.

I then went to Mexico for a couple of years to teach English and to study Spanish. When I returned, I decided to become a teacher, so I went back to school to get my master's degree. After teaching high school for a few years, I was offered a job in California, so I moved to Los Angeles in 1991. After working here for a few years, I went back to school (again!) to get my Ph.D. I was starting to become a professional student.

Well, I completed my Ph.D. in four years and then taught at the university for several years. Now I work at a small research organization here in Los Angeles. I am happily married, and I still enjoy reading and listening to music, and of course, creating ESLPod.com lessons.

[end of story]

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on ESLPod.com.

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Glossary

to be born - to exist as a result of birth; to have come from a mother's or parent's body

* Jeb and Chris are brothers and were born about two years apart.

to be raised - to be brought up as a child; to be cared for as a child until one is an adult

* Omar was raised in the countryside and enjoys horseback riding and outdoor sports.

native - a person born in a specific place; a person from a particular place

* Many people who live in Los Angeles are not natives to the city, having moved there from somewhere else.

baby of the family - the youngest sibling; the youngest child of a set of parents

* Ricky is the baby of the family and complains about being told what to do by all of his sisters.

spoiled - a child who gets whatever he or she wants and doesn't follow rules, behaving badly as a result

* Jiyoung's granddaughter is really spoiled and doesn't listen when other people tell her no.

childhood - the years during which a person is a child; the state of being a child

* What are your happiest childhood memories?

for the most part - mainly; in most cases

* Beatrice arrives to work on time for the most part. The only time she is ever late is when her children are sick.

deprived - not having what one needs to be content; not being allowed to have or to use something

* If I don't follow my parents' rules, I'm deprived of my videogames for a few days as punishment.

grade school - elementary school; a school for the first five to seven years of a child's education

* Did you learn to read well in grade school?

to go on to - to proceed to; to move forward to; to move to the next level

* When you're finished with page one of the exam, turn the page and go on to page two.

bachelor's degree - an undergraduate degree, typically earned after four years of study at a college or university

* Clara has a bachelor's degree in computer science, but she's working in finance.

to learn the ropes - to learn how things are done in a particular organization; to learn how to do a particular job or activity

* It's expected that new employees will make a few mistakes until they learn the ropes.

to graduate - to complete a course of study or a course of training

* Sophie plans to graduate from college this spring and hopes to find a job in her field.

better late than never - a saying meaning that it is better to do something late than to not complete it at all

* A: Here are the chairs I promised to bring for the party.

B: You're two hours late, but better late than never.

master's degree - a graduate degree that is given to a student by a college or university after completing one or two years of study after a bachelor's degree

* If you want to be a pharmacist, you'll need a master's degree to work in most pharmacies.

Ph.D. - a graduate degree that is given to a student by a college or university after several years of additional study following a master's degree

* Kwame hopes to become an English professor at the local college after he gets his Ph.D.

research - efforts to learn more about something, often in a systematic and scientific way

* Will breast cancer research lead to a cure in the next 50 years?

happily married - feeling content and happy in one's marriage

* Pat and Mary are still happily married after being together for over 50 years.

Culture Note

Improving Bicycle Safety

Riding a "bicycle" (a vehicle with two wheels ridden with one's feet while steering with a bar called "handlebars") is part of many people's childhoods. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is a "federal" (national) government "agency" (section of the government) within the Department of Transportation. Its "mission" (goal) is to, "Save lives, ¿prevent' (keep from happening) injuries, reduce vehicle-related ¿crashes' (when two vehicles hit each other unexpected and violently)."

The NHTSA has advice for bicycle riders to try to "reduce" (make smaller or less) accidents. Their advice includes:

Wear a bicycle "helmet" (hard hat with a strap under the chin) that is "fitted" (sized) properly to protect your "brain" (organ in your head that allows you to think and control your body).

"Adjust" (make changes to) your bicycle to fit your body. There should be 1 to 2 inches between you and the top "bar" (long hard piece) if using a "road bike" (bicycle intended to be used on streets) and 3 to 4 inches if you are using a "mountain bicycle" (bicycle used for rough paths). The seat should be "level" (having the same height) front to back. The seat height should be adjusted to allow a "slight" (small; little) "bend" (curve) at the knee when the leg is "fully extended" (at full length). The "handlebar" (piece of a bicycle or motorcycle a rider holds) height should be at the same level with the seat.

Make sure you're able to see well and others are able to see you. Always wear bright colors when riding day or night. Also wear something that "reflects light" (throws back light), such as reflective "tape" (material that I sticky on one side) or markings, or "flashing" (going on and off repeatedly) lights. Remember, just because you can see a driver doesn't mean the driver can see you.

001 Topics: Generations in the United States; blockbuster movies; pronouncing "a"; honeymoon; to outsource; cut to the chase

Complete Transcript

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 1.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café number 1. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

This is our first English Café episode. The format of these episodes - the way we are going to do these episodes - is a little different. We're not going to have a script or a story or a single dialogue to discuss, but instead, it's going to be more informal. We are going to talk about American culture. We're going to talk about American history. We're going to talk about movies and books and music - all sorts of things that are related to the United States. We're also going to be doing some different things. We are going to be answering your questions. We invite you to email your questions to us, and then we will answer them, at least some of them, here on the English Café.

On this Café, we're going to talk about generations in the United States - how we describe people born during different time periods, especially in the last 100 years or so. We're also going to talk about the idea of a "blockbuster," especially a blockbuster movie - what that is and what it involves. And, as always, we'll answer some of your questions. Let's get started.

Our first topic is going to be the names that we give different generations in the United States. I saw an article in the Voice of America news channel a few years ago. The Voice of America, you may know, is a U.S. government-sponsored or U.S. government-supported news service. They have news broadcasts. They actually have a very good section for people learning English. You might want to

go to the Voice of America website and take a look at that.

The title of this story I saw on the Voice of America website had the headline - which is what we call the title of an article, a "headline" - "Aircraft Manufacturer Changing Design to Accommodate Aging Passengers." This headline is actually a good introduction to our topic of names given to generations. First, let's explain the headline briefly. The headline was "Aircraft Manufacturer Changing Design to Accommodate Aging Passengers." "Aircraft" (aircraft) is what people fly in - airplanes, in other words. A "manufacturer" (manufacturer) is someone who makes or manufacturers something. So, an aircraft manufacturer would be a company that makes airplanes.

This story is about how these aircraft manufacturers are changing the designs of the airplanes to accommodate aging passengers. "Aging" (aging) means getting older. "To accommodate" here means to make room for or to provide enough space for someone. We also use this word "accommodate" when we are talking about changing our plans so that someone can participate in something, especially if the person has some sort of problem. We try to accommodate them. We try to find a way of solving the problem for them so they can participate in whatever it is that we are doing.

Here, "accommodate" refers to providing enough physical space for aging passengers. A "passenger" is a person who is riding in some sort of transportation, some form of transportation such as a bus or a train or an airplane. The headline, then, says that these aircraft manufacturers are changing their planes in order to provide room and special services for aging passengers - for passengers who are getting older.

Now we come back to our main topic, which is generations, and you'll see how this story fits into our larger topic. The American population on average has been getting older in the last few years. There are more old people than there used to be. The generation that is currently aging is what is called the "baby boomer" generation. The baby boomer generation was born between the years 1946 and 1964 - basically, those born after World War II up through the 1960s. We call that group of people the "baby boomer" generation.

Why "baby boomer"? Well, the term "boomer" (boomer) comes from a verb, "to boom." "To boom" means to increase suddenly, to increase rapidly. What happened after World War II, when the American economy finally recovered

from the economic problems before the war, was that people started having more babies. This resulted in, or this had the consequence of, increasing the population of the United States relatively quickly. We call everyone born in that duration, in that time, "baby boomers."

The Census Bureau - the department of the United States government that counts how many people are living in the United States - said that beginning in 2006, about 8,000 people a day would turn 60. In other words, this generation is getting older, this baby boomer generation. And this, of course, has consequences for a lot of different things, including the design of airplanes. If we call people born between 1946 and 1964 - people like me - "baby boomers," what do we call people born after 1964?

The names that we give generations are sometimes invented a few years after those people have been born. That's what happened for the generation after the baby boomer generation. People born between 1965 and the early 1980s - say, 1982 or 1983 - are usually called "Generation X" - the letter X. It's sort of a strange name. It actually comes from a popular novel that was published in 1991, called Generation X. The novel itself is about three teenagers living here in California. For whatever reason, that term "Generation X" was applied to those who were born between 1964 and, say, the early 1980s.

Those born after 1983 are often called "Generation Y." Again, that's not a very original name, probably because Y comes after X in the alphabet. More recently, I think people have been calling those born after the early 1980s the "Millennial generation." "Millennial" comes from the word "millennium" - referring, of course, to the new millennium in which we are now living. I'm not sure when we're going to change to a new name for the people born, say, now and on into the future. That's something impossible to predict.

Just in case you're interested, there are also names for the generations before 1946. Those born between, say, 1901 and the mid-1920s are sometimes called the "greatest generation." They're called the "greatest generation" based on a book that was written not too long ago by a journalist in the United States. The "greatest generation" was the generation, including my father's generation, who fought in World War II. Because of their sacrifice - because of what they did for the United States - they are sometimes called the "greatest generation."

Those born between 1920 and the end of World War II, who were for the most

part too young to participate in World War II, are sometimes called the "silent generation." These are people who grew up during the Great Depression - the great economic problems that the United States and other countries experienced during the 1930s. They sometimes call his generation the "lucky few." "Lucky" because they were too young to be sent off to war in World War II. These generational terms apply to those people who were born in the United States. It's not a term that is used worldwide or even in all English-speaking countries. These terms refer to people born in the U.S. in the last hundred years or so.

Our next topic is going to be "blockbuster movies." The word "blockbuster" (blockbuster) refers to a movie, typically, that is very popular, a movie for which a lot of tickets are sold - basically, a movie that makes a lot of money. We sometimes use this term "blockbuster" to describe other artistic creations. We might describe a novel as being a "blockbuster," but usually the term is used to describe a movie that has been very successful. Now, there are a lot of movies that have made a lot of money in the United States and around the world. It's hard to give a list of the movies that have made the most money because that list keeps changing every year.

One blockbuster movie that was popular a few years ago was called King Kong. I don't want to talk too much about the specifics of the movie, although it is a very interesting American movie. I'm more interested in talking about how the movie was described, because it helps us understand a little bit about the elements that make up a blockbuster movie - the parts that are often found in very successful movies. I'll actually read a sentence that was used to describe King Kong when it was released in 2005.

The movie company described the movie as being "about a crew of explorers and filmmakers set out to investigate the myths of the legendary creature, King Kong." The sentence begins by talking about a "crew (crew) of explorers." The word "crew" is used here to describe a small group, usually a group of people who are working together. Nowadays, we often use "crew" to describe people who work on some sort of form of transportation, such as an airplane or a ship. We might talk about the "airplane crew," being the people who are employees of the airline who fly the plane and who take care of the people inside the plane.

Here, it just refers to a small group of people who are trying to do something together, trying to work together. This is a "crew of explorers and filmmakers." The word "explorer" (explorer) refers to someone who goes out and has

adventures, but more importantly, goes out to try and discover something about a new place, a new area, somewhere where no one has gone before. We can talk about the explorers from Europe who went out in their ships during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, going to new worlds like North and South America and Africa and Asia.

Many blockbuster movies - successful blockbuster movies - have this idea of explorers. If you think of Star Wars, for example, or the Star Trek movies, these are about explorers going out to some new, exciting places. The movie King Kong - the 2005 version of King Kong - was about "a crew of explorers and filmmakers." "Filmmakers," all one word, refers to people who, of course, make films. King Kong is a movie made by filmmakers about filmmakers. I guess everybody likes to talk about themselves, including people here in Hollywood.

The filmmakers in the movie "set out to investigate the myths of the legendary creature, King Kong." "To set out" is a phrasal verb meaning to begin, to start - usually on a long journey or trip. Again, a long journey or a long trip is a very common theme in many movies. It's a way of connecting the movie and the characters. In this movie, they "set out to investigate the myths of the legendary creature, King Kong." A "myth" (myth) is basically a made-up story, a false story that may be popular in a certain culture or popular in a certain group. You could think about the famous Greek myths and Roman myths from the ancient world. Myth is a very good source for stories, and a lot of movies are based on myths.

Nowadays, a lot of movies are based on things like video games, but it used to be more common that we made movies based on things like myths. Closely related to the idea of myth, and also very popular in blockbuster movies, is the idea of a "legend" (legend). When we say something is a "legend," we are describing some event or some person who did great things. Sometimes legends aren't all 100 percent true. Sometimes legends are stories about people who really lived, but some of the details of the story may be exaggerated. You may find things in legends that aren't all 100 percent true. The idea is that legends are about famous people in the past. The word "legendary," then, would be about a person or an event that was part of a legend.

The movie King Kong, then, is an example of a blockbuster movie that contains some of the elements that you might find in a very popular movie, or at least in some popular movies - things like myths, legends, adventures, explorers, and

that sort of thing.

Now let's answer some of the questions that you have sent to us.

Our first question on the English Café is from Joao (Joao) from Brazil. Joao wants to know why sometimes we pronounce the letter A as "ay" and sometimes we pronounce it as "ah." Often, when a person is speaking slowly, like I do here on these episodes, we may pronounce words a little differently.

If I'm speaking very slowly, then I'm likely to say "a something," such as "a book." When I'm speaking more quickly, it might be something more like "a book." "I read a book today." There, you hear what we might call the short "a" pronunciation. Sometimes people use the pronunciation of the article "a" when they're trying to indicate that there was just one of something. Someone may say to you, "I understand you read two books yesterday." You might say, "No, I read ¿a' book yesterday," meaning I only read one book.

Since we are just starting our Café series, we don't have a lot of questions to answer in these early episodes. I know we will have more in future ones. I'll talk about a few words that people have emailed me about in the past. I don't have specific names and locations.

One of those words is "honeymoon." What is a honeymoon and why do we call it a honeymoon?" A "honeymoon" (honeymoon) is the period of time immediately after two people get married. The idea is that after you get married, then you go away and you have a little vacation. That vacation is often called a "honeymoon." More generally, "honeymoon" refers to the time after marriage when everything is great, everything is pleasurable.

Why do we call it a "honeymoon?" "Honey" is a sweet substance that bees make. Something, of course, that is sweet is pleasurable, is nice, and the idea of "honeymoon" is it's a nice period. The word "moon" in "honeymoon" is a little more interesting. "Moon" can refer to a month - that is, roughly the time between two full moons. We have another expression in English, "many moons ago." "Many moons ago" means many months ago, or a very long time ago. So, "moon" might represent just those number of days between two full moons - less than a month, I guess.

That would be another possible explanation for "honeymoon." The pleasurable

part of marriage only lasts about a month. So, you should really enjoy your honeymoon. You will hear the term "honeymoon" in other contexts to refer to a period of good relations or positive activities that happen after two companies or two groups of people meet and start working with each other for the first time. It's sometimes referred to as the "honeymoon period."

A common expression is "the honeymoon is over" or "the honeymoon period is over," meaning this initial time that we got together and everything was great - well, that's coming to an end. Now we're having problems. Just like in a marriage, the first few months may seem great, and then certain problems start to develop that you have to deal with, that you have to handle.

Another word I sometimes have been asked about in email messages is the word "outsource" (outsource). The term "outsource" as a verb became popular especially in the 1980s and 1990s to refer to a company or an individual that gives parts of the work required for whatever it is you're making to another company or another person, often someone even in another country. The idea behind "outsourcing" is that there are certain things that are either cheaper or easier to get done outside of your own company.

So, instead of hiring someone to work for your company full-time - all the time - you hire another person or another company to do part of the work for you. "Outsourcing," especially now in the age of the Internet, has become much, much easier to do. "Outsourcing" doesn't necessarily refer to going to another country, however. It could also be referred to as simply getting another person or another company to do part of the work that your company would normally do or might do in order to produce your product or service.

Finally, I want to talk about another famous expression in English that has its origins in a way here in Los Angeles, in Hollywood. That expression is "cut to the chase." "Cut to the chase" (chase) means usually get to the point, get on with it, get to what you really want to tell me. When somebody is giving you an explanation of something, for example, and they seem to be giving you a lot of details that aren't really necessary for you to understand the situation, and perhaps you don't have a lot of time to sit and listen to them, you might say to them, "Cut to the chase."

Now, I have to say that this is something you would only say either to someone who works for you - one of your employees - or someone who is of a lower

status or position than you. You might also be able to say this among friends when you want your friend to hurry up and give you the main part of the information they're trying to convey or to give to you.

Where does this expression "cut to the chase" come from? The most likely explanation is that in action movies, usually towards the end of the movie, there is a chase scene where typically one car is chasing another. "To chase" (chase) is a verb means to go after, to try to catch - especially someone who is trying to escape, to get away from you. So, action movies are most exciting toward the end when you have the chase scenes. "Cut to the chase" would mean get to the exciting part of the movie, and that's really, I think, the origin of this very interesting expression, "to cut to the chase."

If you have a question or comment, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on the English Café.

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Glossary

headline - the title of a news story, usually printed in large letters

* Desiree did not have enough time to read the entire newspaper, so she glanced at the headlines to see if there was anything she wanted to read later.

aircraft - airplane or helicopter; a vehicle or machine that transports people by flying

* The weather has been very stormy lately, making it difficult for any aircraft to operate.

manufacturer - a person or company that makes a product; someone or some company that creates and produces an item that is sold to or used by others

* Since Carlisle's old car had always given him a lot of problems, he decided to buy a new car made by a different manufacturer.

baby boomer - someone born between 1946 and 1964, during a period after World War II ended in which an unusually large number of children were born

* Janine was born February 8, 1947, making her one of the oldest baby boomers.

generation - a group of people born around the same time period; a group of people who were born during a certain time period and share many of the same experiences and ideas as a result

* Florencio tries to keep up with his grandchildren, but he just can't understand the way that people from younger generations think.

Census Bureau - a department of the United States government that regularly counts how many people live in the United States; a government organization that determines the how many people are living in areas within the United States and uses the information to form conclusions about population patterns

* The Census Bureau released information about how many people had moved in and out of Oregon over the past 10 years.

Generation X - the group of people born between the mid-1960s to the early 1980s

* Claude was a member of Generation X and had grown up listening to everything from 1970s disco music to 1980s metal bands.

blockbuster - a movie that is very popular, based on the number of tickets sold; a movie that many people saw or are expected to see

* Titanic was a major blockbuster, earning over \$28 million during its opening weekend in 1997.

crew - a group of people who work together to accomplish a shared task or goal, especially when that task requires physical work

* The news crew raced to set up the equipment so that they could report on the story live.

explorer - an adventurer; someone who visits an unknown or unfamiliar location and investigates or observes that location

* The explorers traveled to a South American rainforest to search for a particular plant they wanted to study.

filmmaker - someone who creates movies; someone who leads the creation of a movie by either directing or producing it

* Tonisha is a filmmaker who specializes in producing documentary films.

to set out - to begin or start a planned project or activity; to start something that is expected to become a long, detailed process

* Roberto and Ella never set out to hurt anyone, but the secret documents they gave to reporters resulted in the closing of the company.

myth - a fictional or untrue story; a story that is used to explain events or things about the way the world works but is not usually based in truth or fact

* The story of Persephone is a Greek myth explaining why the weather goes through four seasons.

legendary - a person or event from a famous or well-known story; something or someone that people tell stories about for many years

* The prank Quentin played during his senior year of high school was so legendary that people are talking about it years after he's graduated.

What Insiders Know

My Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather

It's easy to know what to call your "immediate family" (family closely related to you, such as father, mother, and sister/brother) and even "extended family" (family not as closely related, such as uncles/aunts, cousins, and grandparents). But what do you call your "ancestors" (family members who lived many years before you were born)?

The father of your father is your grandfather. Logically, you would think that your grandfather's father would be your "grand-grandfather," but that is not what Americans would say. Instead, after your grandfather, you add the word "great," so my grandfather's father is your great-grandfather. What do we call your great-grandfather's father? He is your great-great-grandfather. You continue to add "great" for every additional generation you want, so you could talk about your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather (or grandmother, of course).

A similar system is used in talking about your children and your children's children. Your child's child is called your grandchild, and his child would be your great-grandchild, and so forth. If you have a niece (your brother's or sister's daughter) or nephew (your brother's or sister's son), what do I call them? Here things get a little confusing, because it is possible to call them your grandnieces and grandnephews, or your great-nieces and great-nephews. They would call you their great-uncle or granduncle. Great-uncle and great-aunt are much more popular, however, at least in the U.S. After this, you keep adding "greats" as you do with grandparents.

In summary, if you are talking about your parent's parents, you start with "grand" and then add "great(s)." If you are talking about uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews, then you can either start with "great" or use "grand" as you do with grandmother/grandfather.

0366 Talking About Prices

Complete Transcript

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 366: Talking About Prices.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 366. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Visit our website at eslpod.com and download a Learning Guide for this episode.

The Learning Guide is an 8 to 10 page PDF file you can download for all of our current episodes. It gives you the vocabulary, definitions, sample sentences, comprehension questions, additional definitions and cultural notes, and a complete transcript of everything we say on this episode.

This episode is called "Talking About Prices," when you buy and sell things, as well as some general vocabulary related to the economy. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Rosalba: Can you believe these prices? I know we're in a recession, but the cost of everyday necessities shouldn't skyrocket overnight.

William: I think it has something to do with the shortage of produce. I don't know why I'm surprised that stores like this one try to gouge customers at the drop of a hat. I guess it's par for the course - anything to make a little extra money.

Rosalba: You said it! Even when there's a good supply, the prices are never dirt cheap. Any savings the stores get are never passed on to the customers.

William: I have a mind to stop buying fruits and vegetables until the prices go down.

Rosalba: You mean a boycott?

William: Yeah, I won't eat any fruits and vegetables until these high prices come down.

Rosalba: How long do you think you can keep that up?

William: I don't know, but let's find out!

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue begins with Rosalba saying to William, "Can you believe these prices (can you believe the cost of these things)? I know we're in a recession, but the cost of everyday necessities shouldn't skyrocket overnight." "Recession" is used to describe a period of time when a country's economy is not doing very well. We might say it "slows down," there isn't enough or the same amount of business activity. This is a "recession." If things are very serious, then we have what's called a "depression." Many times, in recessions, at least in recent recessions in the last 30 years, sometimes during a recession you also have something called "inflation," where the prices go up as well.

Rosalba says, "we're in a recession, but," she says, "the cost of everyday necessities (or things that you need - things that you must have - things that are necessary) should not skyrocket overnight." "To skyrocket" means to "increase," or go up, very quickly. We often use that word when prices go up very quickly. "The price of gasoline skyrocketed last year," it went up very quickly in the United States. She's saying that prices "shouldn't skyrocket (or go up) overnight," meaning suddenly, quickly. Literally, "overnight" means from one day to the next day, but here it's used more generally to mean very, very quickly.

William says, "I think it has something to do with the shortage of produce." A "shortage" is when you don't have enough of something. "We have a shortage of good ESL teachers in Los Angeles," we need more good teachers." We have a shortage of intelligent politicians," we need a lot more! In this case, there's a shortage of produce. "Produce" is a word we use to describe vegetables and fruits. If you go into a grocery store, there's usually a "produce department," where all of the vegetables and fruits are found. This word has a couple of different meanings; take a look at our Learning Guide for some additional explanations of "produce," which can also be a verb, "to produce."

William says, "I don't know why I'm surprised that stores like this one try to gouge customers at the drop of a hat." William is saying that he doesn't understand - he doesn't know why that he's surprised. In other words, he should not be surprised; it should be something that he expects. He should expect that stores like this one try to gouge customers. "To gouge" (gouge) means to charge more money or to raise the price on something much higher than usual. It's a negative way of describing someone - a business - that increases their prices. Some people say, "This is an unfair price; they're charging too much money - they're gouging us." This is often done when you don't have anywhere else to go or any other option; you must pay this because you need it.

William says he should expect that stores "try to gouge customers at the drop of a hat." That expression, "at the drop of a hat," means very quickly, without advance notice, or without any good reason. Something that happens "at the drop of a hat" happens very quickly. We might even snap our fingers and use the expression "just like that" (Jeff snaps his fingers). Very quickly - "at the drop of a hat."

William says, "I guess it's par for the course - anything to make a little extra money." The expression "par (par) for the course" means normal, usual, something that's to be expected. This expression actually comes from the game of golf. A "golf course" is a place where you play golf. "To be par for the course" means to have the average score that you would expect from the course.

Rosalba says to William, "You said it!" This is an informal phrase that we use to show that you agree with someone completely. For example, someone says, "The government is not doing a good job with health care in the United States; people don't have good medical insurance," and someone else says, "You said it," meaning I agree with you completely.

"Even when there's a good supply," Rosalba continues, "the prices are never dirt cheap." She's talking about the produce - the fruits and vegetables. She says, "Even when there's a good supply (meaning an amount of something that is available, something that the store is selling, even when they have a lot) the prices are never dirt cheap." For something to be "dirt cheap" means it's very inexpensive, a very low price; this is "dirt cheap." ESL Podcast is dirt cheap compared to many places where you could study English - well, that's what I think!

"Any savings the stores get are never passed on to the consumers." Rosalba is saying that even when the store has a lot of something, and it isn't expensive for them to buy the product, they never pass on those savings to the customers. "To pass something on to someone" means to share it with someone; someone gives you something, and you give it to someone else - you "pass it on." The stores do not pass on the money they save to the customers.

William then says, "I have a mind to stop buying fruits and vegetables until the prices go down." The expression "I have a mind to do something" is used to show that you are thinking seriously about doing something, or that, perhaps, you are tempted to do something. It's something that seems very attractive to you to do. We often use this expression when we are talking about doing something in reaction to a negative situation. So your girlfriend calls you up and says, "Oh, I'm sorry. I cannot meet you for dinner, I have to go with my friend from college." You suspect that your girlfriend's friend is a boy, and you say to someone, "I have a mind to go and find my girlfriend and make sure she's not with another man." That's never happened to me - well, not recently! But, that would be an example of the expression "I have a mind to do something."

Rosalba asks William, "You mean a boycott?" "You mean" means do you mean - is this what you are talking about, a boycott (boycott)? A "boycott" is when people agree not to buy or use something until the conditions change, until the situation changes. Back in the 1970s, there were people who boycotted grapes, the fruit. The reason they were boycotting them is because they were "protesting," they were saying there was something wrong with the way that the farms were paying and treating the workers. Many of them came from Mexico, and people thought that they were not giving them enough money so there was a boycott. People didn't buy grapes so that the companies would be punished.

William says, "Yeah, I won't eat any fruits and vegetables until these high prices come down," until they are reduced to a lower amount. Rosalba says, "How long do you think you can keep that up?" "To keep something up" is a two-word phrasal verb meaning to continue to do something, to be able to do something. "I'm running five miles an hour, and I can keep that up for about five minutes, and then I get too tired." That's to "keep something up," to keep doing it. There are some additional explanations of that phrasal verb in our Learning Guide; take a look at that.

Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Rosalba: Can you believe these prices? I know we're in a recession, but the cost of everyday necessities shouldn't skyrocket overnight.

William: I think it has something to do with the shortage of produce. I don't know why I'm surprised that stores like this one try to gouge customers at the drop of a hat. I guess it's par for the course - anything to make a little extra money.

Rosalba: You said it! Even when there's a good supply, the prices are never dirt cheap. Any savings the stores get are never passed on to the customers.

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Rosalba: You mean a boycott?

William: Yeah, I won't eat any fruits and vegetables until these high prices come down.

Rosalba: How long do you think you can keep that up?

William: I don't know, but let's find out!

[end of dialogue]

The script for this episode was written by Dr. Lucy Tse, who can write a good script at the drop of a hat!

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on ESL Podcast.

English as a Second Language Podcast is written and produced by Dr. Lucy Tse, hosted by Dr. Jeff McQuillan. This podcast is copyright 2008.

Glossary

price - cost; the amount of money that must be used to buy something; the amount of money for which something is sold

* The price of chicken is usually less than the price of beef.

recession - a period of time when a country's economy slows down and there is less business activity

* The United States had a recession in the 1980s and many people think that the country is entering another recession now.

necessity - something that one needs; something that one must have to live; something that is more than just a want or desire

* If you don't find a job, how will you pay for your basic necessities, like food and housing?

to skyrocket - to increase very much and very quickly

* When the band made its third CD, its popularity skyrocketed and soon its music was heard on the radio all the time.

shortage - a lack of something; the state of not having enough of something; having less of something than one needs

* That country has a lot of gold and zinc, but a shortage of copper.

produce - fresh fruits and vegetables

* There are a lot of apples in the produce section of the grocery store at this time of year.

to gouge - to extort; to charge more money than usual; to charge an unfair price

* The university is gouging its students, charging \$6,000 more in tuition this year than it did last year.

at the drop of a hat - very quickly, without cause or reason; without advance notice and/or without a reason for doing something

* They said that they were going to buy the house, but then they changed their minds at the drop of a hat, without giving any explanation.

par for the course - normal; usual; typical; to be expected

* Some parents think it is par for the course that their children drink alcohol in college.

you said it - an informal phrase used to show that one fully agrees with what another person has just said

* Hermione said that she thought the government should spend more money on education and health care. Her sister nodded her head and said, "You said it!"

supply - the amount of something that is available, especially for sale

* My economics professor said that when the supply of something increases, the price usually drops.

dirt cheap - extremely inexpensive; very low price

* During the summer, tomatoes were dirt cheap, only \$0.75 per pound!

to pass (something) on to (someone) - to share something with someone; to give something that one has received to another person

* Mindy heard some great ideas for saving money and she decided to pass them on to her friends.

to have a mind to - a phrase used to show that one is thinking about doing something, or that one is tempted to do something

* I have a mind to quit my job, but I don't want to do that until I've found another place to work.

boycott - an agreement not to buy or use something until conditions change

* The families in this neighborhood decided that a boycott of that store was necessary to force them to stop selling adult magazines.

to keep (something) up - to continue to do something; to be able to do something

* Gunther recently started exercising for two hours every day, but I don't think he'll be able to keep it up for very long.

Comprehension Questions

1. What prices are increasing?

- a) The prices of skyrocket.
- b) The prices of produce.
- c) The prices of hats.

2. What does Rosalba think should happen?

- a) When there is a lot of something, it should cost more.
- b) Stores should do what they can to make extra money.
- c) When the store saves money, customers should too.

Answers at bottom.

What Else Does It Mean?

produce

The word "produce," in this podcast, means fresh fruits and vegetables: "Doctors

say that we should eat at least five servings of produce each day." As a verb, "to produce," the pronunciation is different, with the accent on the second syllable. "To produce" means to manufacture, make, or create something: "This factory produces thousands of tires every day." The verb "to produce" can also mean to cause something, or to cause something to happen: "This medication produces headaches in 5% of the patients who take it." Or, "The government's decision produced a rise in interest rates." "To produce" can mean to show something to another person: "The lawyer produced very compelling evidence in court." Finally, "to produce" can mean to provide the money for a movie to be made: "Do you know who produced that film?"

to keep (something) up

In this podcast, the phrase "to keep (something) up" means to continue to do something or to be able to do something: "Kulon is working three jobs. How long will she be able to keep that up?" The phrase "to keep (something) going" means to manage a business or organization so that it continues to operate: "When the value of the dollar fell, so did the company's sales, but the president was able to keep it going for several years." The phrase "to keep at (something)" or "to keep at it" means to continue to do something even though it is difficult, and is used to encourage other people so that they don't stop doing something: "I know that playing the violin is difficult, but if you keep at it, you'll soon be playing beautiful music!"

Culture Note

The phrase "consumer protection" refers to laws and government actions that help "consumers" (people who buy or use things). Consumer protection can include getting customers the information they need to make educated buying decisions and stopping companies from "taking advantage of" (doing things that will hurt another person) consumers.

In the United States, there are many consumer protection "acts" (laws). Some of them are "federal" (national) and other are at the state level. The Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, for example, limits how companies can collect "debts" (money owed to another person or organization) from consumers. It limits when companies can call consumers, states that they have to stop contacting them if they are requested to do so "in writing" (with a written letter), and prevents them from using "threatening" (making one feel fearful for one's safety) language, among other things.

The Fair Credit Reporting Act is another consumer protection act. It controls how consumers' credit information can be used. Certain companies have detailed information about how individuals use "credit" (money that is loaned to a person or organization), including whether they are good about paying that money back when and how they are supposed to. The Fair Credit Reporting Act limits who can "access" (see copies of) that information.

The Truth in Lending Act creates rules for "lenders" (organizations that give money to people and other organizations for a short period of time so that they will be paid back that money and more in the future). It requires "full disclosure" (a statement that contains all the facts) about how the loan is made and how much it really costs to borrow the money.

These are just a few of the acts that are designed to protect American consumers.

Comprehension Answers

1 - b

2 - c

366 Topics: Ask an American: Saving the space program; point versus period versus dot; using "no" with a verb; all the same

Complete Transcript

You're listening to ESL Podcast English Café number 366.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 366. I'm your host Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California. Our website is eslpod.com. Go there, become a member, download a Learning Guide, improve your English faster than you ever thought possible.

On this Café, we're going to have another one of our "Ask an American" segments where we listen to other native speakers talking at a normal speed, then we go back and we explain what they said. Today, we're going to be talking about space exploration in the United States - why some people think it's important for the U.S to continue its space exploration program. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started!

We'll listen to astrophysicist - someone who is a scientist interested in outer space - we're going to listen to astrophysicist Neil deGrasse, He's going to talk about what is going on with the space exploration program in the United States in the year 2012, which is when we're recording this episode. We'll listen and then go back and explain what he says. Let's start.

[recording]

"And right now, the United States has no vehicle of its own to take our astronauts to orbit. We have to hitch a ride with the Russians. In fact, if you hitched a ride it implies you got on for free. But we are riding with the Russians because we are paying for those seats. So it's a little embarrassing, I think."

[end of recording]

Dr. deGrasse - Neil - can I call him Neil? Yeah - Neil. Neil says that "Right now - at this time - the United States has no vehicle of its own to take our astronauts to orbit." The word "vehicle" (vehicle) is normally word we use to describe an automobile - a car, that is. It could also describe a truck that you drive, but here it means a machine with a motor or an engine in it that takes people from one place to another. So, vehicle has a more general meaning and that's the meaning that Neil is using here. He's, of course, talking about a "space vehicle" - a machine that will take people from Earth up into outer space such as what we used to have the space shuttle do. Neil says that "Right now, the United States doesn't have a vehicle of its own - meaning one that belongs to the United States - to take our astronauts to orbit." An "astronaut" (astronaut) is a word we discussed a few weeks ago on the Café. An "astronaut" is someone whose job it is to fly in a space vehicle up into outer space. "Orbit" (orbit) here refers to the circular path that a space ship takes around a planet - in this case, Earth. We can use this as a verb. We say, "The Earth orbits around the sun," meaning the Earth goes around the sun. And "The moon orbits around Earth." The moon goes around the Earth. Well, when you have a space vehicle, the vehicle will orbit around the earth just like a satellite. It will go around in a circular path or something close to that. I don't think it is actually a true circle.

Neil says that because the United States doesn't have a space vehicle of its own, we have to "hitch a ride with the Russians." The expression "to hitch (hitch) a ride (ride)" means to ask for, and get someone else to take you - usually in their car or in their truck or in their vehicle - from one place to another. When you don't have a car, you can go out on the street or the highway and you can "hitch a ride." Another word we use is "hitchhike" (hike) at the end. "To hitchhike" means to travel around from place to place, city to city - when you don't have a car - by going out and basically asking people to take you from one place to another. In the United States, the normal way of doing this is to put your hand out with your thumb extended - in the direction of where the car is going - and that indicates that you want to hitch a ride. This is not recommended in most places in the United States. It can be very dangerous. I probably would not suggest you do that here. And in some places now, I think it's illegal to do that. You could be arrested for doing that, especially on a freeway or a highway. Well, this is the idea that Neil is talking about when he says, the U.S has to "hitch a ride with the Russians" or "hitch a ride from the Russians," we could say. This

means that the Russians still have a space vehicle and if we want to send astronauts into space, we have to, basically, ask, or pay for the astronauts to get up into outer space, going with the Russian vehicle.

He says, "In fact if you hitched a ride, it implies you got on for free" - and remember, that's what I said, that when you hitch a ride, you get someone else to take you. The idea is that they don't charge you any money. If you had money, you'd take a bus or some other way of getting to where you want to go. Neil reminds us, however, that hitching a ride with the Russians is not free. He says, "We are riding with the Russians because we are paying for those seats." A "seat" (seat) is where you sit. So, when Neil says, "We're paying for those seats," he means - just like on an airplane, you have to pay in order to fly on the airplane. We have to pay the Russians to fly on their or in their space vehicle. He thinks it's a little embarrassing. "To be embarrassed" means to feel a little ashamed or to feel bad because the situation isn't very good for you and perhaps because you've done something wrong. That's usually when we feel embarrassed. But Neil thinks it's embarrassing for the United States to have to pay another country in order to send its astronauts up into outer space. I'm not sure if Neil is right about that but that's his opinion and he's sticking to it - he's holding to it, he's not going to change it. Here's Neil again.

[recording]

"And right now, the United States has no vehicle of its own to take our astronauts to orbit. We have to hitch a ride with the Russians. In fact, if you hitched a ride it implies you got on for free. But we are riding with the Russians because we are paying for those seats. So it's a little embarrassing, I think."

[end of recording]

Neil thinks - not surprisingly - the United States should spend more money on space exploration. You have to understand that the United States in the last two or three years has basically decided to end its space program - at least, sending men and women up in the space shuttle. The space shuttle is no longer operating and so the U.S doesn't have a way now to send people up into space. The U.S Government is actually spending less money now on space exploration than they used to. Let's listen to Neil again.

[recording]

"Because it's just that kind of adventure that stokes the health of our economy and in this, the 21st century, science and technological innovation will define who leads the century and who does not. What we have found in the golden era of space exploration here in America that even though space was driven by war, the consequence of that was a completely shifted outlook that the entire country had about what was possible for our future. And the people who bring tomorrow into today are the scientists and technologists."

[end of recording]

Neil begins by saying, "It's just that kind of adventure that stokes the health of our economy." He's talking about the adventure or the excitement of going up into space. He thinks that this kind of adventure - this kind of excitement, this kind of journey, this kind of experience - "stokes" the health of our economy. "To stoke" (stoke) usually is used to talk about fire. We use the verb "to stoke a fire," meaning you try to make it burn more, to burn hotter, maybe adding more wood, blowing air on it - that sort of thing. I don't know. I don't start a lot of fires personally, but that's what the verb is used for. "Stoke" can also be used to mean to make something bigger or stronger. In this case, Neil is saying that a strong space program can "stoke" the health of our economy. "Our economy" refers to the jobs that people have - the money that we have. "To stoke the health of our economy" would mean to improve our economy. So, he thinks that having a space exploration program will cause our economy to be stronger and healthier. There's another use I should mention of the word "stoke" when you add a *ɪd* at the end and use the verb "to be." You can say, "I am stoked," or "She is stoked." That means you're really excited about something. You're feeling a lot of energy. You're ready to do something. "I'm very happy about something. I'm stoked about my trip to Las Vegas. I'm going to go and I'm going to win a lot of money." Actually, I probably will lose a lot of money. But that's the idea of being *ɪstoked* with a *ɪd* at the end.

Neil says that "Now in the 21st century - the century we're in right now, the hundred year period we're in - science and technological innovation will define who leads the century and who does not." "Innovations" (innovations) are new things, new ideas for developing and creating things. Over the past few years we've seen a lot of technological innovations, new ideas related to technology - computers and phones and that sort of thing. Neil says that "These kinds of technological innovations will define who leads the century and who does not."

"To define" means to decide, in this case. "To lead" means, of course, to be in first place. So, whoever, whatever country - Neil means - has the most technological innovation, will be the country that leads in this 21st century. Next, Neil talks about the "golden era of space exploration" in the United States. "The golden era" (era) describes a period of time when everything is wonderful, when it is the best that it has ever been. We sometimes also refer to this as the "golden age" (age) - "the golden age of Spanish literature," or "the golden age of English technology." Is there English technology? I don't know. "The golden age of the Hollywood musical" - the kind of film where people sing and dance - these are all ways of describing a period of time when things are at their very best. Neil talks about the "golden era of space exploration" here in America. He says, "Even though space was driven by war, the consequence of that was a completely shifted outlook."

So, we have to explain a little context here. Neil is describing the period during the 1960's and the 1970's when the United States had a very active space program - Apollo 11 going to the moon, having other Apollo spacecraft go up into space and to the moon, having or helping with the International Space Station in later years - all of this was part of the golden age or golden era of space exploration, when the U.S was going out into space and sending men and women up into space.

He says that in the 60's and 70's, this space exploration effort was "driven by war." "To be driven" means here to be caused. He's saying that it was the Cold War - I think this is what he means. The Cold War between the U.S and the then Soviet Union - the competition militarily, and politically between the U.S and the U.S.S.R - caused the U.S to invest more money into space exploration because, of course, the Russians were doing the same thing - the Soviets I should say. Neil is saying that even though that was the case - despite the fact - that it was driven by war, it still had a positive consequence - a positive result. And the result was that there was a completely shifted outlook. An "outlook" (outlook) - one word - is your perspective. It's the way you view the world or view a situation. "To shift" (shift), as a verb, means to change - often from one direction to another. So, a shifted outlook would be a changed perspective - a changed way of looking at the world. And Neil believes that our space exploration program shifted the outlook of the entire country - the United States - about what was possible for our future. So, it gave us dreams about what was possible because of the ability to go up into space.

He said that "people who bring tomorrow into today are the scientists and technologist." So, Neil is saying that it's people like himself - isn't that a coincidence? - scientists and technologists - people who develop technology, such as all of those folks up in Silicon Valley here in California where all of the big technology companies are - these are the people, Neil believes, who bring tomorrow into today - that is, they help us understand and make possible our future. Neil believes that he and others like him are the key to our future - our development as an economy and perhaps as a country. Neil has a very high opinion of himself.

Now let's listen one more time to what Neil is saying.

[recording]

"Because it's just that kind of adventure that stokes the health of our economy and in this, the 21st century, science and technological innovation will define who leads the century and who does not. What we have found in the golden era of space exploration here in America that even though space was driven by war, the consequence of that was a completely shifted outlook that the entire country had about what was possible for our future. And the people who bring tomorrow into today are the scientists and technologists."

[end of recording]

Now let's answer some of the questions you have sent to us.

Our first question comes from Alexey (Alexey) from Russia. So, maybe Alexey can give me a ride into outer space! Alexey has a question about three words - "point," "period," and "dot." "Point" (point) can mean a couple of different things. As a verb it can mean to indicate a certain thing - often using your hand or your finger. "I want that one over there" - you point with your finger, you move your finger to indicate where it is you are talking about or what you are talking about I should say. "Point" as a noun can mean the end, or the tip of something. We can talk about the point of a pencil or a pen that you write with. It's the very end of it - that can be the point. "The point" can also mean something completely different, which is an idea or a purpose or the goal, the aim, the reason you're doing something. "What is the point of this lecture?" "What is the point of this book? What is it trying to say?" "What is its goal? What is its purpose?"

"Period" (period) is, again, a couple of different things. As a noun it can be used in talking about punctuation, to refer to the end of a sentence. It's a little small round thing that you put at the end of a sentence to end the sentence. In British English it's called "full stop." "Period" can also be a length of time - a certain period of time, a certain length of time.

"Dot" (dot), as a noun, is a small mark. It's something you would make with a pen or pencil - with a point of a pen or pencil. You could make a little small round circle and fill it in - that would be a dot. You can make a dot. In fact, that's what you do when you write a period with a pen or a pencil. You make a little dot, you make a little small, round circle that goes at the end of a sentence, and you make that with the point of a pen or a pencil.

So, now you can see the connection between "point," "period," and "dot." "Dot" can also be used to describe a larger circle but normally it's a small circle that you would write with a pen or a pencil. "Dot" is also used in talking about web addresses, and I think here the confusion comes in between "period" and "dot." For whatever reason, in English, when we talk about a web address, we use the word "dot" instead of "period." I think the reason is that period implies or usually refers to the end of a sentence. But in a web address, there's always something after that little "dot" so you can't really call it a period. So, our website address is eslpod "dot" com (com). We would not say "period" because "period" would mean that's the end and that you're not going to say anything after that that's connected directly with what is before that. I'm just guessing but I think that's probably why in web addresses we use the word "dot," or in email addresses. Our email address is eslpod@ - and that stands for the "at" sign which is a little "a" with a circle around it - eslpod "dot" com.

When I defined "point," I didn't mention the geometric definition - the definition we would use in geometry for a point and a line. There the point is kind of like the idea of a dot although mathematicians I'm sure would tell me I was wrong to define it that way. So, "point" at least in math and geometry has some relationship to what we're talking about here when it comes to dots and periods.

Our next question is also from Russia - with love I'm sure - Sevyatoslav. How do you like my pronunciation for (Sevyatoslav)? I had to look that up on the Internet. You know, you can just put in Google "how to pronounce" and then somebody's name and there are a couple of websites that will give you

pronunciation of the name. Sometimes I do that, sometimes I forget. I apologize if I mispronounce your name here on the Café. I will try to do better at that here in 2012.

Anyway, "our friend from Russia" - we'll call him - wants to know the use of the word "no." He wants to know about how we use "no" in expressions such as, "Where the Streets Have No Name," which is a song by the rock group U2, or another song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction," by The Rolling Stones. Why do we say, "no satisfaction," or "no name." Well, this is a question that refers to the use of the word "no" as an adjective to mean not any. "There are no reasons for you to be here." Another way of saying that is: there does not exist any reason for you to be here - it's a negation of the noun that follows. "There is no reason" means there is not any reason. If you say "The streets have no name," you mean that they don't have any names - the streets are nameless. In The Rolling Stones song, "I can't Get No Satisfaction" - that's the line in the song. I think the word is - the song is just called "Satisfaction." Anyway, there - it's a little different because the Stones are using informal English where, as you probably know, sometimes people use two negatives in a sentence and in most English sentence you only have one negative word. So, if you use the word "no" or "not" and then you use another negative word again, it has the opposite meaning. Correct grammar would say, "They can't get any satisfaction," or "They can get no satisfaction." But The Rolling Stones speaking informally in English, or singing informally in English, say, "I can't get no," and you'll hear that's used as an informal way of saying, "I cannot get any," or "I can get no satisfaction." So they're not getting any satisfaction, basically.

The reason the people sometimes use the "no" in front of the noun - as an adjective - can sometimes be related to poetic use of the language, and song writers are in some ways poets. So, they might use an expression like "The streets have no name" rather than saying, "There are no names for the streets," or "The streets are nameless" - all those things mean the same thing. But they don't quite sound as interesting as the U2 song or The Rolling Stones song.

If you have a question, if you can't get no satisfaction about your English vocabulary, email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again here on The English Café.

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Glossary

vehicle - automobile; car; any machine with a motor or engine that takes people and goods from one place to another

* Frank drives a small compact car, but he says his next vehicle will be a pickup truck.

astronaut - a person whose job is to fly in a space shuttle or other space vehicles

* Most astronauts have degrees in science and engineering.

orbit - the circular path of an object around another object

* How much fuel is required to launch a satellite into orbit?

to hitch a ride - to get a ride from someone; to be a passenger in a car or vehicle that someone else is driving, without paying that person any money

* Can I hitch a ride to work with you tomorrow?

to imply - to mean something without saying it directly; to have an indirect meaning

* What do you think she was implying when she said that?

to stoke - to make something bigger and stronger; to increase something

* Growing up in poverty stoked Rashad's desire for a high-paying job.

innovation - the process of forming new ideas and creating new things

* Some companies believe that giving their employees gifts, flexible schedules, free food, and massages makes them more creative and encourages innovation.

golden era - a period of time when things were very good and there were many advances

* In your opinion, when was the golden era of rock music?

space exploration - the process of going into space and learning as much as possible about it

* Jan became interested in space exploration because she wants to know whether there is life on other planets.

driven by - motivated or influenced by something

* The kingdom's collapse was driven by the ruler's selfishness and greed.

to shift - to change one's position; to change the position of something; to move a short distance

* The little girl shifted in her seat at the theater during the entire performance.

outlook - a person's point of view; one's general attitude about life

* During the economic recession, economists observed a change in people's outlook about education.

point - a sharp end; the tip of something

* Ouch! Do you have to use a needle with such a sharp point?

period - a punctuation mark that is used to end a sentence

* If you use too many exclamation marks, they lose their impact. Try using periods more often.

dot - a small mark; a small spot

* Without his glasses, Kryzstof can't read anything. He just sees dots and lines, not letters and words.

all the same - anyway; nevertheless; even though

* This project will probably fail, but all the same, I'd like to try to make it work.

What Insiders Know

The Jetsons

The Jetsons was an "animated" (with drawings) TV show that "aired" (was shown on TV) from 1962-1963 and 1985-1987. It "portrayed" (showed) the daily life of the Jetson family living 100 years in the future, in the year 2062.

The family "comprises" (is made up of) George, Judy, their two children, a "robot" (a human-like machine) "maid" (a woman who cleans the house), and a talking dog. The 1985-1987 show added a few other characters, too. George works only three hours a day, three days a week. Many of the scenes "take place" (happen, occur) in his workplace, where he is often blamed for things that go wrong. His boss often says, "Jetson, you're fired!" but George always gets his job back by the end of the episode.

The Jetson family lives in an apartment built on an "adjustable" (able to be changed) "column" (a vertical structure that supports weight). They enjoy many "labor-saving devices" (machines designed to do work for humans, like washing machines and dishwashers) and live a life of "leisure" (play, not work). The devices often "fail to" (do not) work correctly, and that is often the basis of the humor in episodes. The family travels in an "aerocar," which has a glass bubble top and flies through the air instead of being driven on a road.

The television series has been adapted into many "comic books" (books with many pictures and few words), video games, and films. It has also been adapted for other cultures and translated into other languages.

In many ways, the series now seems "quaint" (old-fashioned, but in a nice, attractive way), but it provides an interesting "glimpse" (quick view) of what people in the 1960s expected to see in the future.

0731 Hints and Innuendo

Complete Transcript

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 731: Hints and Innuendo.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 731. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Eslpod.com, that's our website. Go there and become a member of ESL Podcast and help keep this podcast going.

This episode is a dialogue between Roberta and John about vocabulary related to "innuendo," when we indirectly communicate meaning to other people. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Roberta: You know, my birthday is coming up.

John: Yeah, I know. What are you getting at?

Roberta: Nothing. I was just thinking that it's kind of an important birthday, a major birthday.

John: Yes, I know. Spit it out. What are you driving at?

Roberta: I was just thinking that some people might not know what to get me for such an important birthday, since some people don't like to put a lot of thought into presents.

John: What are you implying? Are you insinuating that I don't get you good presents for your birthdays?

Roberta: No, of course not. I just don't want you to have to rack your brain to

think of the perfect gift, that's all.

John: Just tell me. What should I get you for your very important birthday?

Roberta: What? Just blurt it out? I can't do that. I can give you a hint, but since you love me so much, I'm sure you can read my mind.

John: That's where you're wrong. If I had a nickel for every time a woman thought I should be able to read her mind, I'd be the richest man in the world! I don't have an inkling of what you have on your mind.

Roberta: All right, I'll make it more than a hint. I'll give you three clues.

John: Great. That'll make things crystal clear.

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue begins with Roberta saying to John, "You know, my birthday is coming up." Something that is "coming up" is something that will be happening in the near future, something that will occur soon. John says, "Yeah, I know. What are you getting at?" "To get at" is to say something indirectly, to communicate something to another person without saying it directly. You're suggesting something. Roberta says, "Nothing (she's not getting at anything). I was just thinking that it's kind of an important birthday, a major birthday." John says, "Yes, I know. Spit it out." "Spit (spit) it out" is an expression that means say something quickly, stop trying to hide it. It's often used when someone will talk about something that is embarrassing or difficult, or perhaps critical of the other person. But when you say "spit it out," you're saying to the person just say it now, directly. John says, "What are you driving at?" "To drive at" means the same as "to get at," to say indirectly.

Roberta says, "I was just thinking that some people might not know what to get me for such an important birthday, since some people don't like to put a lot of thought into presents." "Some people," if you notice the way Roberta says it, is a way that we say something about another person without using their name. We're really saying "you," but you're trying to be polite or perhaps funny by just putting it in this neutral third person - or in this case, third people - "some people." "Some people (meaning you) might not know what to get me for such an important birthday, since some people (you, John) don't like to put a lot of

thought into presents (or gifts)." "To put a lot of thought into (something)" is to think about something seriously for a long time, give it a lot of thought, a lot of serious considering before making a decision.

John says, "What are you implying?" "To imply" (imply) means to strongly suggest something without saying it directly. Well, John is asking what Roberta is implying. He says, "Are you insinuating that I don't get you good presents for your birthdays?" "To insinuate" (insinuate) means to suggest that something is bad, something is wrong, without saying it directly. It's similar to "imply," but it always has a negative connotation; something bad is being implied.

Roberta says, "No, of course not (of course she wasn't insinuating that John gives her bad presents for her birthdays). I just don't want you to have to rack your brain to think of the perfect gift, that's all." So, Roberta is saying these things to help John, that's what she says. She doesn't want John to rack (rack) his brain. "To rack your brain" means to put a lot of thought into something, to take a long time to think of something. We also use this if we're having difficulty remembering something or someone. "I'm racking my brain trying to think of the name of the girl who sat next me in social studies class when I was a senior in high school." I think her first name was Linda. Lydia I can't remember. Anyway, that's what racking your brain is, trying to think of something, spending a lot of time and energy doing it.

So Roberta says she's trying to help John, and John says, "Just tell me. What should I get you for your very important birthday?" Roberta says, "What? Just blurt it out?" "To blurt (blurt) (something) out" is a phrasal verb meaning to say something without first thinking carefully about what you are saying or how you will say it. Sometimes people say things, and then they realize that it was a mistake to tell someone something. Maybe they're nervous, maybe they're excited; they blurt something out, they say something they shouldn't.

Roberta says that she doesn't really want to blurt it out, to tell John directly. She says, "I can't do that. I can give you a hint, but since you love me so much, I'm sure you can read my mind." A "hint" (hint) is a small piece of information that suggests something else. It's a clue; it's to help you guess something or figure something else out. "To read someone's mind" means to know what the other person is thinking. So Roberta is saying here that she can give John a clue - a hint, but because John loves her so much he should be able to read her mind.

Now, this is something that many women believe about men - wives about their husbands, girlfriends about their boyfriends - that because they love them they should know what they want for their birthday. But of course, we men know this isn't true!

John says, "That's where you're wrong. If I had a nickel for every time a woman thought I should be able to read her mind, I'd be the richest man in the world!" This phrase, "if I had a nickel (which is five cents) for every time something happens, I'd be rich," the idea is that this has happened to you many, many times. If each time it happened you got a very small amount, say a nickel, which is five American cents, you would be rich because it has happened to you so many times. You could say "if I had a dollar" or "if I had a quarter." It has to be a small amount of money. John is saying that many women in his life have thought that he should be able to read their minds. He says, "I don't have an inkling of what you have on your mind." An "inkling" (inkling) is a little bit of knowledge, a small idea; you know a little bit, but not very much. John says he doesn't have an inkling. He doesn't have any idea what is on Roberta's mind, what she's thinking, what she wants for her birthday.

Roberta says, "All right, I'll make it more than a hint. I'll give you three clues." A "clue" (clue) is a piece of information that helps you solve a problem, usually when there's some sort of crime or mystery involved. Roberta's going to give John three clues to what she wants to have for her birthday. Notice we say "clues to (something)." You have clues to the gift, in this case.

John says, "Great. That'll make things crystal clear." The expression "crystal (crystal) clear" means easy to understand, no doubt about something. It's obvious almost; you know exactly what it is. That's something that is crystal clear. "The professor gave crystal clear definitions about what he was talking about," they were easy to understand. We're not sure here if John is being sarcastic, if he's making a joke, because of course a clue is not the same as the actual answer to the problem. But we hope John will buy the right gift and figure it out!

Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Roberta: You know, my birthday is coming up.

John: Yeah, I know. What are you getting at?

Roberta: Nothing. I was just thinking that it's kind of an important birthday, a major birthday.

John: Yes, I know. Spit it out. What are you driving at?

Roberta: I was just thinking that some people might not know what to get me for such an important birthday, since some people don't like to put a lot of thought into presents.

John: What are you implying? Are you insinuating that I don't get you good presents for your birthdays?

Roberta: No, of course not. I just don't want you to have to rack your brain to think of the perfect gift, that's all.

John: Just tell me. What should I get you for your very important birthday?

Roberta: What? Just blurt it out? I can't do that. I can give you a hint, but since you love me so much, I'm sure you can read my mind.

John: That's where you're wrong. If I had a nickel for every time a woman thought I should be able to read her mind, I'd be the richest man in the world! I don't have an inkling of what you have on your mind.

Roberta: All right, I'll make it more than a hint. I'll give you three clues.

John: Great. That'll make things crystal clear.

[end of dialogue]

Our scriptwriter puts a lot of thought into these wonderful scripts. We thank you Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again here on ESL Podcast.

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Glossary

coming up - happening in the near future; occurring soon

* Coming up next, we'll talk to a man who has three pet bears.

to get at - to say indirectly; to communicate something to another person without saying it directly; to strongly suggest something without saying it

* Why are all of you moving your chairs away from me and holding your noses? What are getting at?

to spit (something) out - to say something quickly and without delay that may be difficult, embarrassing, or hurtful to say or for another person to hear

* I'm asking you children who broke Mom's favorite vase? Spit it out!

to drive at - to say indirectly; to communicate something to another person without saying it directly; to strongly suggest something without saying it

* After 40 minutes, Carl finally found out what his sister was driving at. She wanted to borrow money from him.

to put a lot of thought into (something) - to think about something a lot before taking action; to consider many things before making a decision

* Manuel put a lot of thought into the gift he bought his new girlfriend.

to imply - to strongly suggest something without saying it; to communicate that something exists or is the truth without stating it

* Our boss implied that there would be less money for bonuses this year, but he wouldn't answer any direct questions about it.

to insinuate - to make a suggestion that something bad is true without stating it

* Beth was tired of her relatives insinuating that she was too old to find a

husband.

to rack (one's) brain - to use a lot of effort to think of or to remember something

* Deng racked his brain for a half hour, but couldn't remember the combination to the lock on the safe.

to blurt (something) out - to say something without first thinking about what one will say, how one will say it, and/or how others will react

* If I tell you a secret, don't blurt it out when you're with your friends, okay?

hint - a small or indirect suggestion about something; a clue

* My parents won't tell me what I'm getting as a Christmas gift, but they gave me a hint that it was related to my computer.

to read (one's) mind - to be able to know what someone is thinking without that person telling you; for someone to know something about another person without having to be told

* The architect must have read my mind because the plans for the new house are exactly what I wanted.

If I had a nickel for every time 'xc3'xa2'xc2'x80'xc2'xa6(I'd be rich) - a phrase used to say that something happens a lot or that something is very common

* If I had a nickel for every time Olah made an excuse when he was late, I'd be rich.

inkling - a slight idea; a little bit of knowledge that will give some information about something else; a hint

* Do you have an inkling why James is wearing a thick coat on a hot summer day?

clue - a piece of information or idea that helps to solve a problem; information used to solve a crime or mystery

* The footprint in the mud was an important clue to solving the crime.

crystal clear - easy to understand or see; having no doubt about something

* None of the students had a crystal clear idea about the difficult concept their teacher talked about in class, but reading their textbook helped them better understand it.

Comprehension Questions

1. What does Rebecca want John to do?

- a) Buy her a gift.
- b) Give her a nickel.
- c) Drive her to the store.

2. What is crystal clear?

- a) Rebecca wants to buy John a birthday gift.
- b) Rebecca wants a special gift for her birthday.
- c) Rebecca is John's sister.

Answers at bottom.

What Else Does It Mean?

coming up

In this podcast, "coming up" means for something to happen in the near future or for something to occur soon: "Our vacation to New York is coming up, so we'll need to reserve a hotel room." "To come up with" means to think of new ideas or useful pieces of information: "Can you come up with some ideas for entertainment appropriate for both children and adults?" Or, "Stop coming up with excuses for not cleaning out the garage!" "To come up for air" means to begin to relax after a very busy period of time: "Our dress shop has more orders than we can handle and I don't know when we'll come up for air."

clue

In this podcast, a "clue" is a piece of information or idea that helps to solve a problem, or information used to solve a crime or mystery: "I know that you've planned a surprise, but could you give me a clue about where you're taking me?" "To clue (someone) in" means to tell someone about something that he or she

doesn't already know about: "After thinking a lot about it, Genise finally clued her friend in that her friend's husband was not being faithful to her." Or, "Can you clue me in on how to use the new fax machine?" "To not have a clue" means to not know anything about something or to not know how to do something: "Javier has no clue where he'll get the money to help his parents, but he'll do anything to help them keep their house."

Culture Note

Teenage Milestone Birthdays and the Selective Service System

In a typical American's "lifetime" (the period of time a person is alive), he or she experiences several "milestone" birthdays. "Milestones" are significant periods or events "indicating" (showing; marking) significant changes or stages in development.

For teenage girls, their 16th birthday is sometimes celebrated with a "sweet 16" party, indicating that she is "on the verge of" (nearly) becoming a woman. The 16th birthday is important also because most states allow people 16 years old or older to apply for a driver's license.

For both boys and girls, their 18th birthday is important because this is the age typically considered the beginning of "adulthood" (the state of being an adult; not childhood). At age 18, most teenagers have graduated high school and are expected to either attend college or begin working. Many 18-year-olds move out of their parents' home, another "rite of passage" (event that indicates that a person is maturing and becoming like an adult).

Teenage boys at age 18 are required by law to register with the Selective Service System. The Selective Service System is the U.S. government's way of keeping information about men who are "eligible for" (meet the requirements for) the "draft," when the government requires that men serve in the military, usually because there is a war and not enough "voluntary" (done by one's own choice or decision) soldiers. Men who are between the ages of 18 and 25 are required to register with the Selective Service System, and those "turning" (becoming) 18 years old are required to register within 30 days of their 18th birthday.

Comprehension Answers

1 - a

2 - b

1096 Improving Online Reviews

Complete Transcript

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 1,096 - Improving Online Reviews.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 1,096. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Visit our website at ESLPod.com. Become a member of ESL Podcast - when you do, you can download the Learning Guides for these episodes.

This episode is a dialogue about improving or making better reviews that you read on the Internet. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Jerrise: Okay, you were right. We need to do something to improve business. Do you think we should take out an ad in the local newspaper?

Russell: We could do that, but I think a better strategy is to improve our online reviews.

Jerrise: Who looks at websites with unsolicited reviews? I'm not convinced that'll help us.

Russell: Lots of people look at reviews when choosing which business to patronize. Right now, we only have three stars out of five, and that's hurting us.

Jerrise: It's hard to believe that adding a star will really improve our business.

Russell: Believe it. And those mediocre reviews we received last week? We should respond to each one and try to make it right.

Jerrise: Those reviews were written by a few disgruntled customers. We're

always going to have a few whiners.

Russell: Yes, but now they're much more vocal. If they're not happy with our service or product, we need to compensate them for their bad experience.

Jerrise: That would put us out of business!

Russell: No, that's an investment in our business reputation.

Jerrise: What you're saying is that we need to bribe people to write good reviews.

Russell: I wouldn't put it that way, but we should recognize that crowdsourcing is the wave of the future and we need to move with the times if our business is to survive.

Jerrise: All right. I guess we can try that.

Russell: What are you doing now?

Jerrise: Writing my own review. I've always given myself excellent service!

[end of dialogue]

Our dialogue begins with Jerrise saying to Russell, "Okay, you were right. We need to do something to improve our business. Do you think we should take out an ad in the local newspaper?" An "ad" (ad) is an advertisement - a way of promoting or letting people know about your business or your products.

Jerrise mentions "taking out an ad in the newspaper." "To take out an ad" means to place or put an advertisement, in this case, in a newspaper. You can also take out an advertisement in a magazine. A more general term for this is "to place (place) an advertisement." That's probably a more useful expression, because we could use that in talking about placing an advertisement on a website, for example, or placing an advertisement on the radio.

Russell responds to Jerrise's question by saying, "We could do that, but I think a better strategy" - a better approach - "is to improve our online reviews." "Online" refers to on the Internet - on a website, typically. A "review" is when someone

posts or puts their opinion about a product or a service either in a newspaper or, more commonly nowadays, on a website.

Jerrise says, "Who looks at websites with unsolicited reviews?" "Unsolicited" (unsolicited) is the opposite of "solicited." "To solicit" as a verb means to ask for. The prefix "un-" means "not." So, "unsolicited" is something that you didn't ask for, something that you didn't request someone do.

Most reviews that you read online are unsolicited in the sense that the business doesn't ask you for a review. Sometimes they do - a smart business will ask you to put a review of your product or service on a website so other people can see how much you like their product or their service - but an unsolicited review is when no one asks you. You just do it because you want to.

Jerrise says, "I'm not convinced that'll help us." Russell says, "Lots of people look at reviews when choosing which businesses to patronize." "To patronize" (patronize) means to be a customer of a particular business - or at least, that's what it means in this sentence.

Russell says, "Right now, we only have three stars out of five, and that's hurting us." Often when you post or place a review of a, say, restaurant, you are asked to give the restaurant or the product a certain number of stars. Usually there are five stars, at least in most American websites that have reviews of this sort. A five-star review would be a review that says, "This is a wonderful product. It's the best you could ask for." If you give a business only one star, that means that you didn't like the product or service very much.

Russell says that his and Jerrise's business has, at least on the website they're talking about, three stars out of five, which is just sort of average. Russell, in fact, thinks that it is hurting them. Jerrise says, "It's hard to believe that adding a star will really improve our business." What Jerrise means here is that by improving their rating, their average rating, from, say, three stars out of five to four stars out of five, would really help them.

But Russell says in fact it will. He says, "Believe it," meaning you should believe what I'm telling you is true. He continues, "And those mediocre reviews we received last week? We should respond to each one and try to make it right." "Mediocre" (mediocre) means not very good. It's not a word you would use to describe something that's terrible. It's sort of in between good and bad, but more

on the bad side.

What Russell is saying is that their business got some mediocre reviews last week. He says they should try to "respond to each one and try to make it right." "To make something right" means to fix something - to correct a bad situation, especially when you're talking about a customer of your business. Jerrise says, "Those reviews were written by a few disgruntled customers." "To be disgruntled" (disgruntled) means to be unhappy, to be dissatisfied, to have a lot of complaints or things you don't like about something, especially a business.

Jerrise says, "We're always going to have a few whiners." "Whiner" (whiner) comes from the verb "to whine" (whine). "To whine" means to complain, to complain loudly, sometimes in an annoying voice. We often associate whining with children. You know, when your child goes, "But mom, I want to go to the store. Please. I want to go to the store" - something like that. I don't know. You know, when I was a child, my mother says I was an angel, a perfect child. I never whined. Well, that's what she tells me, anyway. Or was that my brother?

Russell agrees with Jerrise that there will always be whiners. However, he says that the people complaining on the website are "much more vocal" now. "To be vocal" (vocal) means to express your opinions loudly, usually in spoken words - however, in this case it means someone is writing more in their review. You can't literally be vocal if we're talking about writing, but we use the term when talking about writing to refer to someone who is writing a lot more than they might otherwise.

Russell says, "If the customers are not happy with our service, we need to compensate them for their bad experience." "To compensate" (compensate) someone means to give something to someone - to pay someone something, either money or something else of value, in return for what that person did, or in this case, to make up for a bad experience.

We can use the verb "to compensate" to mean the same as "to pay," as in, "I'm going to compensate my employees." I'm going to pay them money for working for me. But here "compensate" means "to make up for" - to do something for someone because something bad has happened to them and you are the cause of that bad experience.

Jerrise disagrees. She doesn't think the business should compensate these

customers who are complaining. She says, "That would put us out of business!" "To put someone out of business" is to make a business close, usually because the business isn't making enough money.

Russell disagrees. He says, "No, that's an investment in our business reputation." An "investment" in something is money or resources or energy you put into something in the hopes of getting more in the future back from that particular activity. "Reputation" refers to what other people think about you. You can have a good reputation or you can have a bad reputation.

Jerrise says, "What you're saying is that we need to bribe people to write good reviews." "To bribe" (bribe) means to pay someone money so that he or she will do something for you, especially something that may be considered illegal or dishonest. Don't confuse this with the noun "bride" (bride), which is a woman who is going to get married. Unless you want to bribe a woman to be your bride, which is probably not a good idea.

Russell doesn't consider this bribing. He says, "I wouldn't put it that way," meaning I wouldn't say it that way. He says, "We should recognize that crowdsourcing is the wave of the future and we need to move with the times if our business is to survive." "Crowdsourcing" (crowdsourcing) - all one word - means to use the services or opinions of many different people, usually by using the Internet somehow.

"The wave of the future" refers to the things that are becoming popular and will be common in the future or in the near future. "To move with the times" means to change and adjust your actions or behaviors to do what other people are doing. Jerrise says, "All right. I guess we can try that."

Russell says, "What are you doing now?" Jerrise says, "Writing my own review. I've always given myself excellent service!" Jerrise is going to write a review of her own business, saying how wonderful her business is - which, of course, is not exactly what the website that carries these reviews would probably want to see.

Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Jerrise: Okay, you were right. We need to do something to improve business. Do you think we should take out an ad in the local newspaper?

Russell: We could do that, but I think a better strategy is to improve our online reviews.

Jerrise: Who looks at websites with unsolicited reviews? I'm not convinced that'll help us.

Russell: Lots of people look at reviews when choosing which business to patronize. Right now, we only have three stars out of five, and that's hurting us.

Jerrise: It's hard to believe that adding a star will really improve our business.

Russell: Believe it. And those mediocre reviews we received last week? We should respond to each one and try to make it right.

Jerrise: Those reviews were written by a few disgruntled customers. We're always going to have a few whiners.

Russell: Yes, but now they're much more vocal. If they're not happy with our service or product, we need to compensate them for their bad experience.

Jerrise: That would put us out of business!

Russell: No, that's an investment in our business reputation.

Jerrise: What you're saying is that we need to bribe people to write good reviews.

Russell: I wouldn't put it that way, but we should recognize that crowdsourcing is the wave of the future and we need to move with the times if our business is to survive.

Jerrise: All right. I guess we can try that.

Russell: What are you doing now?

Jerrise: Writing my own review. I've always given myself excellent service!

[end of dialogue]

Our scriptwriter is always moving with the times and giving you the very latest in American English in her dialogues. Thank you, Lucy.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on ESL Podcast.

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Glossary

to take out an ad - to advertise in a publication; to place an ad in a newspaper, magazine, or other publication

* How much does it cost to take out a full-page ad in the New York Times?

online - on the Internet; on a website

* Do you pay your bills online, or do you mail checks?

review - a written assessment of a product or service, often describing one's experience to inform other potential customers

* That new restaurant is getting great reviews. Let's try them.

unsolicited - without being requested or asked for; offered voluntarily, without any prompting

* Why do so many people want to give me unsolicited advice about my love life?

to patronize - to be a customer of a particular business

* Most of the people who patronize that clothing store are young women in their late teens and early 20s.

(number) stars out of (number) - a description of the rating of quality or value of someone or something, usually where five or ten is the highest number of stars possible

* All the hotels that have earned five stars out of five are too expensive for us, so we'll have to look at some hotels that have lower ratings.

mediocre - not very good, but not terrible; of medium quality

* Those pancakes were mediocre at best. We won't use that recipe again.

to make it right - to do something to fix or correct a bad situation, or to satisfy a customer

* The airline apologized for the flight delay and offered \$200 travel vouchers to the passengers to make it right.

disgruntled - unhappy, dissatisfied, angry, and full of complaints

* A lot of shoppers were disgruntled when the store ran out of basic necessities like bread and milk.

whiner - a person who complains loudly in an annoying voice

* Those whiners said it wasn't fair, but we said, "Life isn't fair" and asked them to change the subject.

vocal - expressing one's opinions loudly in spoken words

* Nick is very vocal about his dislike of country music.

to compensate (someone) - to pay someone for something; to give someone money or something of value in return for something that he or she did, or to make up for a bad experience

* We compensate our employees for the long hours they work with generous salaries and good benefits.

to put (someone) out of business - to make a business close because it is not

profitable; to lead to the end of business that is not making money

* The poor weather put some of the local farmers out of business.

investment - money that is spent in the hopes of receiving something better in the future, such as more money or a stronger business

* Think of college tuition as an investment in your future.

reputation - the way that a business or person is known in a community; positive or negative public opinion about someone or something

* Professor Midara has a reputation for being strict, but fair.

to bribe - to pay someone money so that he or she will do something, especially something that is illegal or dishonest, for one's benefit

* The contractors bribed the mayor to award them the contract, giving him secret payments totaling more than \$60,000.

to put (something) that way - to phrase something a particular way

* I disagreed with you, but since you've put it that way, I think you're right.

crowdsourcing - using the services and/or opinions of many people through the Internet

* The search-and-rescue team is using crowdsourcing, asking people around the world to review satellite images to look for the missing aircraft.

the wave of the future - something that is becoming popular and will be common in the future

* Do you think wearable technology is the wave of the future?

to move with the times - to change and adjust one's actions or behaviors to do what other people are doing, so that one is not left with old-fashioned habits

* Companies that provided traditional telephone service have had to move with

the times to provide cell-phone services as well.

Comprehension Questions

1. What will they do if they "take out an ad in the local newspaper"?

- a) They will remove their ad from the newspaper.
- b) They will cut out their competitor's ads for reference.
- c) They will place an ad in the local newspaper.

2. If your business receives a mediocre review, you would...?

- a) Be very happy.
- b) Close my business.
- c) Be unhappy.

Answers at bottom.

What Else Does It Mean?

vocal

The word "vocal," in this podcast, means expressing one's opinions loudly in spoken words: "Local reporters have been very vocal in their criticism of the City Council." Or, "Blake is a vocal supporter of local schools." The word "vocal" also relates to the voice, especially a singing voice: "Kelly is taking voice lessons to develop her vocal talent." The phrase "on vocals" is used to refer to the people who sings in a song or on an album: "I know who is on drums and guitar, but who is on vocals?" Finally, "vocal chords" are thin muscles in the throat that allow one to make noise by speaking or singing: "Vic had a sore throat that affected his vocal chords and made it impossible to speak for two days."

to put (something) that way

In this podcast, the phrase "to put (something) that way" means to express or phrase something a particular way: "That was a terrible thing to say! I agree with the idea, but you don't have to put it that way." The phrase "to put (something) away" means to put something where it belongs, or to return something to its place: "Please put all these toys away before dinnertime." When talking about money, the phrase "to put (something) away" means to save an amount of money for a particular purpose in the future: "Each month, they put a few dollars away for college." Finally, the phrase "to put (someone) away" means to put someone

in prison or jail for a period of time: "I hope they put that murderer away for the rest of his life."

Culture Note

Online Reviews Controversies

As "consumers" (people who buy things) become "increasingly" (more and more) dependent on online reviews when making their "purchasing decisions" (decisions about what to buy), many companies feel pressured to improve their online reviews. Some companies do this in honest ways, such as asking satisfied customers to place reviews on popular websites, sometimes offering "discounts" (lower prices) to people who do so. But other businesses "turn to" (decide to have or use) dishonest methods.

For example, some companies "secure" (get) "paid reviews," paying people money so that they will write and "post" (put on a website) "favorable" (positive; saying good things about someone or something) reviews.

Other people and companies post multiple reviews for their own benefit. For example, authors and "publishing houses" (companies that produce books) have been known to use Amazon.com to post multiple reviews of their own books, encouraging others to buy them. Others "take this to another level" (do something in a more extreme way), posting negative reviews of competitors' products to discourage consumers from purchasing those goods.

In response, some websites allow people to place reviews only if they have purchased the product through that site, or booked a hotel through the travel website. Other websites address the problem by having "moderators" whose job is to "review" (read and evaluate) other reviews, making sure that they are acceptable before they are "made public" (presented for everyone to read). However, this raises concern about "censorship" (controlling what people may and not read) and "infringements" (violations) of people's "right to free speech" (legally protected ability to say what one wants, regardless of whether other people agree with it).

Comprehension Answers

1 - c

2 - c

Omens

Sometimes, when you dig into the Earth, past its surface and into the crustal layers, omens appear. In 1676, Oxford professor Robert Plot was putting the final touches on his masterwork, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*, when he received a strange gift from a friend. The gift was a fossil, a chipped-off section of bone dug from a local quarry of limestone. Plot recognised it as a femur at once, but he was puzzled by its extraordinary size. The fossil was only a fragment, the knobby end of the original thigh bone, but it weighed more than 20 lbs (nine kilos). It was so massive that Plot thought it belonged to a giant human, a victim of the Biblical flood. He was wrong, of course, but he had the conceptual contours nailed. The bone did come from a species lost to time; a species vanished by a prehistoric catastrophe. Only it wasn't a giant. It was a Megalosaurus, a feathered carnivore from the Middle Jurassic.

Plot's fossil was the first dinosaur bone to appear in the scientific literature, but many have followed it, out of the rocky depths and onto museum pedestals, where today they stand erect, symbols of a radical and haunting notion: a set of wildly different creatures once ruled this Earth, until something mysterious ripped them clean out of existence.

Last December I came face to face with a Megalosaurus at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. I was there to meet Nick Bostrom, a philosopher who has made a career out of contemplating distant futures, hypothetical worlds that lie thousands of years ahead in the stream of time. Bostrom is the director of Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute, a research collective tasked with pondering the long-term fate of human civilisation. He founded the institute in 2005, at the age of 32, two years after coming to Oxford from Yale. Bostrom has a cushy gig, so far as academics go. He has no teaching requirements, and wide latitude to pursue his own research interests, a cluster of questions he considers crucial to the future of humanity.

Bostrom attracts an unusual amount of press attention for a professional philosopher, in part because he writes a great deal about human extinction. His work on the subject has earned him a reputation as a secular Daniel, a doomsday prophet for the empirical set. But Bostrom is no voice in the wilderness. He has a growing audience, both inside and outside the academy. Last year, he gave a

keynote talk on extinction risks at a global conference hosted by the US State Department. More recently, he joined Stephen Hawking as an advisor to a new Centre for the Study of Existential Risk at Cambridge.

Though he has made a swift ascent of the ivory tower, Bostrom didn't always aspire to a life of the mind. 'As a child, I hated school,' he told me. 'It bored me, and, because it was my only exposure to books and learning, I figured the world of ideas would be more of the same.' Bostrom grew up in a small seaside town in southern Sweden. One summer's day, at the age of 16, he ducked into the local library, hoping to beat the heat. As he wandered the stacks, an anthology of 19th century German philosophy caught his eye. Flipping through it, he was surprised to discover that the reading came easily to him. He glided through dense, difficult work by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, able to see, at a glimpse, the structure of arguments and the tensions between them. Bostrom was a natural. 'It kind of opened up the floodgates for me, because it was so different than what I was doing in school,' he told me.

But there was a downside to this epiphany; it left Bostrom feeling as though he'd wasted the first 15 years of his life. He decided to dedicate himself to a rigorous study programme to make up for lost time. At the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, he earned three undergraduate degrees, in philosophy, mathematics, and mathematical logic, in only two years. 'For many years, I kind of threw myself at it with everything I had,' he told me.

There are good reasons for any species to think darkly of its own extinction

As the oldest university in the English-speaking world, Oxford is a strange choice to host a futuristic think tank, a salon where the concepts of science fiction are debated in earnest. The Future of Humanity Institute seems like a better fit for Silicon Valley or Shanghai. During the week that I spent with him, Bostrom and I walked most of Oxford's small cobblestone grid. On foot, the city unfolds as a blur of yellow sandstone, topped by grey skies and gothic spires, some of which have stood for nearly 1,000 years. There are occasional splashes of green, open gates that peek into lush courtyards, but otherwise the aesthetic is gloomy and ancient. When I asked Bostrom about Oxford's unique ambience, he shrugged, as though habit had inured him to it. But he did once tell me that the city's gloom is perfect for thinking dark thoughts over hot tea.

There are good reasons for any species to think darkly of its own extinction.

Ninety-nine per cent of the species that have lived on Earth have gone extinct, including more than five tool-using hominids. A quick glance at the fossil record could frighten you into thinking that Earth is growing more dangerous with time. If you carve the planet's history into nine ages, each spanning five hundred million years, only in the ninth do you find mass extinctions, events that kill off more than two thirds of all species. But this is deceptive. Earth has always had her hazards; it's just that for us to see them, she had to fill her fossil beds with variety, so that we could detect discontinuities across time. The tree of life had to fill out before it could be pruned.

Simple, single-celled life appeared early in Earth's history. A few hundred million whirls around the newborn Sun were all it took to cool our planet and give it oceans, liquid laboratories that run trillions of chemical experiments per second. Somewhere in those primordial seas, energy flashed through a chemical cocktail, transforming it into a replicator, a combination of molecules that could send versions of itself into the future.

For a long time, the descendants of that replicator stayed single-celled. They also stayed busy, preparing the planet for the emergence of land animals, by filling its atmosphere with breathable oxygen, and sheathing it in the ozone layer that protects us from ultraviolet light. Multicellular life didn't begin to thrive until 600 million years ago, but thrive it did. In the space of two hundred million years, life leapt onto land, greened the continents, and lit the fuse on the Cambrian explosion, a spike in biological creativity that is without peer in the geological record. The Cambrian explosion spawned most of the broad categories of complex animal life. It formed phyla so quickly, in such tight strata of rock, that Charles Darwin worried its existence disproved the theory of natural selection.

No one is certain what caused the five mass extinctions that glare out at us from the rocky layers atop the Cambrian. But we do have an inkling about a few of them. The most recent was likely borne of a cosmic impact, a thudding arrival from space, whose aftermath rained exterminating fire on the dinosaurs. The ecological niche for mammals swelled in the wake of this catastrophe, and so did mammal brains. A subset of those brains eventually learned to shape rocks into tools, and sounds into symbols, which they used to pass thoughts between one another. Armed with this extraordinary suite of behaviours, they quickly conquered Earth, coating its continents in cities whose glow can be seen from space. It's a sad story from the dinosaurs' perspective, but there is symmetry to

it, for they too rose to power on the back of a mass extinction. One hundred and fifty million years before the asteroid struck, a supervolcanic surge killed off the large crurotarsans, a group that outcompeted the dinosaurs for aeons. Mass extinctions serve as guillotines and kingmakers both.

Bostrom isn't too concerned about extinction risks from nature. Not even cosmic risks worry him much, which is surprising, because our starry universe is a dangerous place. Every 50 years or so, one of the Milky Way's stars explodes into a supernova, its detonation the latest gong note in the drumbeat of deep time. If one of our local stars were to go supernova, it could irradiate Earth, or blow away its thin, life-sustaining atmosphere. Worse still, a passerby star could swing too close to the Sun, and slingshot its planets into frigid, intergalactic space. Lucky for us, the Sun is well-placed to avoid these catastrophes. Its orbit threads through the sparse galactic suburbs, far from the dense core of the Milky Way, where the air is thick with the shrapnel of exploding stars. None of our neighbours look likely to blow before the Sun swallows Earth in four billion years. And, so far as we can tell, no planet-stripping stars lie in our orbital path. Our solar system sits in an enviable bubble of space and time.

But as the dinosaurs discovered, our solar system has its own dangers, like the giant space rocks that spin all around it, splitting off moons and scarring surfaces with craters. In her youth, Earth suffered a series of brutal bombardments and celestial collisions, but she is safer now. There are far fewer asteroids flying through her orbit than in epochs past. And she has sprouted a radical new form of planetary protection, a species of night watchmen that track asteroids with telescopes.

'If we detect a large object that's on a collision course with Earth, we would likely launch an all-out Manhattan project to deflect it,' Bostrom told me. Nuclear weapons were once our asteroid-deflecting technology of choice, but not anymore. A nuclear detonation might scatter an asteroid into a radioactive rain of gravel, a shotgun blast headed straight for Earth. Fortunately, there are other ideas afoot. Some would orbit dangerous asteroids with small satellites, in order to drag them into friendlier trajectories. Others would paint asteroids white, so the Sun's photons bounce off them more forcefully, subtly pushing them off course. Who knows what clever tricks of celestial mechanics would emerge if Earth were truly in peril.

Even if we can shield Earth from impacts, we can't rid her surface of

supervolcanoes, the crustal blowholes that seem bent on venting hellfire every 100,000 years. Our species has already survived a close brush with these magma-vomiting monsters. Some 70,000 years ago, the Toba supereruption loosed a small ocean of ash into the atmosphere above Indonesia. The resulting global chill triggered a food chain disruption so violent that it reduced the human population to a few thousand breeding pairs — the Adams and Eves of modern humanity. Today's hyper-specialised, tech-dependent civilisations might be more vulnerable to catastrophes than the hunter-gatherers who survived Toba. But we moderns are also more populous and geographically diverse. It would take sterner stuff than a supervolcano to wipe us out.

‘There is a concern that civilisations might need a certain amount of easily accessible energy to ramp up,’ Bostrom told me. ‘By racing through Earth's hydrocarbons, we might be depleting our planet's civilisation startup-kit. But, even if it took us 100,000 years to bounce back, that would be a brief pause on cosmic time scales.’

It might not take that long. The history of our species demonstrates that small groups of humans can multiply rapidly, spreading over enormous volumes of territory in quick, colonising spasms. There is research suggesting that both the Polynesian archipelago and the New World — each a forbidding frontier in its own way — were settled by less than 100 human beings.

The risks that keep Bostrom up at night are those for which there are no geological case studies, and no human track record of survival. These risks arise from human technology, a force capable of introducing entirely new phenomena into the world.

‘Human brains are really good at the kinds of cognition you need to run around the savannah throwing spears’

Nuclear weapons were the first technology to threaten us with extinction, but they will not be the last, nor even the most dangerous. A species-destroying exchange of fissile weapons looks less likely now that the Cold War has ended, and arsenals have shrunk. There are still tens of thousands of nukes, enough to incinerate all of Earth's dense population centres, but not enough to target every human being. The only way nuclear war will wipe out humanity is by triggering nuclear winter, a crop-killing climate shift that occurs when smoldering cities send Sun-blocking soot into the stratosphere. But it's not clear that nuke-levelled

cities would burn long or strong enough to lift soot that high. The Kuwait oil field fires blazed for ten months straight, roaring through 6 million barrels of oil a day, but little smoke reached the stratosphere. A global nuclear war would likely leave some decimated version of humanity in its wake; perhaps one with deeply rooted cultural taboos concerning war and weaponry.

Such taboos would be useful, for there is another, more ancient technology of war that menaces humanity. Humans have a long history of using biology's deadlier innovations for ill ends; we have proved especially adept at the weaponisation of microbes. In antiquity, we sent plagues into cities by catapulting corpses over fortified walls. Now we have more cunning Trojan horses. We have even stashed smallpox in blankets, disguising disease as a gift of good will. Still, these are crude techniques, primitive attempts to loose lethal organisms on our fellow man. In 1993, the death cult that gassed Tokyo's subways flew to the African rainforest in order to acquire the Ebola virus, a tool it hoped to use to usher in Armageddon. In the future, even small, unsophisticated groups will be able to enhance pathogens, or invent them wholesale. Even something like corporate sabotage, could generate catastrophes that unfold in unpredictable ways. Imagine an Australian logging company sending synthetic bacteria into Brazil's forests to gain an edge in the global timber market. The bacteria might mutate into a dominant strain, a strain that could ruin Earth's entire soil ecology in a single stroke, forcing 7 billion humans to the oceans for food.

These risks are easy to imagine. We can make them out on the horizon, because they stem from foreseeable extensions of current technology. But surely other, more mysterious risks await us in the epochs to come. After all, no 18th-century prognosticator could have imagined nuclear doomsday. Bostrom's basic intellectual project is to reach into the epistemological fog of the future, to feel around for potential threats. It's a project that is going to be with us for a long time, until — if — we reach technological maturity, by inventing and surviving all existentially dangerous technologies.

The abandoned town of Pripyat near Chernobyl. *Photo by Jean Gaumy/Magnum*

There is one such technology that Bostrom has been thinking about a lot lately. Early last year, he began assembling notes for a new book, a survey of near-term

existential risks. After a few months of writing, he noticed one chapter had grown large enough to become its own book. 'I had a chunk of the manuscript in early draft form, and it had this chapter on risks arising from research into artificial intelligence,' he told me. 'As time went on, that chapter grew, so I lifted it over into a different document and began there instead.'

On my second day in Oxford, I met Daniel Dewey for tea at the Grand Café, a dim, high-ceilinged coffeehouse on High Street, the ancient city's main thoroughfare. The café was founded in the mid-17th century, and is said to be the oldest in England. Dewey is a research fellow at the Future of Humanity Institute, and his specialty is machine superintelligence.

'Here's a softball for you,' I said to him. 'How do we know the human brain doesn't represent the upper limit of intelligence?'

'Human brains are really good at the kinds of cognition you need to run around the savannah throwing spears,' Dewey told me. 'But we're terrible at anything that involves probability. It actually gets embarrassing when you look at the category of things we can do accurately, and you think about how small that category is relative to the space of possible cognitive tasks. Think about how long it took humans to arrive at the idea of natural selection. The ancient Greeks had everything they needed to figure it out. They had heritability, limited resources, reproduction and death. But it took thousands of years for someone to put it together. If you had a machine that was designed specifically to make inferences about the world, instead of a machine like the human brain, you could make discoveries like that much faster.'

Dewey has long been fascinated by artificial intelligence. He grew up in Humboldt County, a mountainous stretch of forests and farms along the coast of Northern California, at the bottom edge of the Pacific Northwest. After studying robotics and computer science at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, Dewey took a job at Google as a software engineer. He spent his days coding, but at night he immersed himself in the academic literature on AI. After a year in Mountain View, he noticed that careers at Google tend to be short. 'I think if you make it to five years, they give you a gold watch,' he told me. Realising that his window for a risky career change might be closing, he wrote a paper on motivation selection in intelligent agents, and sent it to Bostrom unsolicited. A year later, he was hired at the Future of Humanity Institute.

I listened as Dewey riffed through a long list of hardware and software constraints built into the brain. Take working memory, the brain's butterfly net, the tool it uses to scoop our scattered thoughts into its attentional gaze. The average human brain can juggle seven discrete chunks of information simultaneously; geniuses can sometimes manage nine. Either figure is extraordinary relative to the rest of the animal kingdom, but completely arbitrary as a hard cap on the complexity of thought. If we could sift through 90 concepts at once, or recall trillions of bits of data on command, we could access a whole new order of mental landscapes. It doesn't look like the brain can be made to handle that kind of cognitive workload, but it might be able to build a machine that could.

The early years of artificial intelligence research are largely remembered for a series of predictions that still embarrass the field today. At the time, thinking was understood to be an internal verbal process, a process that researchers imagined would be easy to replicate in a computer. In the late 1950s, the field's luminaries boasted that computers would soon be proving new mathematical theorems, and beating grandmasters at chess. When this race of glorious machines failed to materialise, the field went through a long winter. In the 1980s, academics were hesitant to so much as mention the phrase 'artificial intelligence' in funding applications. In the mid-1990s, a thaw set in, when AI researchers began using statistics to write programs tailored to specific goals, like beating humans at Jeopardy, or searching sizable fractions of the world's information. Progress has quickened since then, but the field's animating dream remains unrealised. For no one has yet created, or come close to creating, an artificial general intelligence — a computational system that can achieve goals in a wide variety of environments. A computational system like the human brain, only better.

If you want to conceal what the world is really like from a superintelligence, you need a really good plan

An artificial intelligence wouldn't need to better the brain by much to be risky. After all, small leaps in intelligence sometimes have extraordinary effects. Stuart Armstrong, a research fellow at the Future of Humanity Institute, once illustrated this phenomenon to me with a pithy take on recent primate evolution. 'The difference in intelligence between humans and chimpanzees is tiny,' he said. 'But in that difference lies the contrast between 7 billion inhabitants and a permanent place on the endangered species list. That tells us it's possible for a relatively small intelligence advantage to quickly compound and become

decisive.’

To understand why an AI might be dangerous, you have to avoid anthropomorphising it. When you ask yourself what it might do in a particular situation, you can’t answer by proxy. You can’t picture a super-smart version of yourself floating above the situation. Human cognition is only one species of intelligence, one with built-in impulses like empathy that colour the way we see the world, and limit what we are willing to do to accomplish our goals. But these biochemical impulses aren’t essential components of intelligence. They’re incidental software applications, installed by aeons of evolution and culture. Bostrom told me that it’s best to think of an AI as a primordial force of nature, like a star system or a hurricane — something strong, but indifferent. If its goal is to win at chess, an AI is going to model chess moves, make predictions about their success, and select its actions accordingly. It’s going to be ruthless in achieving its goal, but within a limited domain: the chessboard. But if your AI is choosing its actions in a larger domain, like the physical world, you need to be very specific about the goals you give it.

‘The basic problem is that the strong realisation of most motivations is incompatible with human existence,’ Dewey told me. ‘An AI might want to do certain things with matter in order to achieve a goal, things like building giant computers, or other large-scale engineering projects. Those things might involve intermediary steps, like tearing apart the Earth to make huge solar panels. A superintelligence might not take our interests into consideration in those situations, just like we don’t take root systems or ant colonies into account when we go to construct a building.’

It is tempting to think that programming empathy into an AI would be easy, but designing a friendly machine is more difficult than it looks. You could give it a benevolent goal — something cuddly and utilitarian, like maximising human happiness. But an AI might think that human happiness is a biochemical phenomenon. It might think that flooding your bloodstream with non-lethal doses of heroin is the best way to maximise your happiness. It might also predict that shortsighted humans will fail to see the wisdom of its interventions. It might plan out a sequence of cunning chess moves to insulate itself from resistance. Maybe it would surround itself with impenetrable defences, or maybe it would confine humans — in prisons of undreamt of efficiency.

No rational human community would hand over the reins of its civilisation to an

AI. Nor would many build a genie AI, an uber-engineer that could grant wishes by summoning new technologies out of the ether. But some day, someone might think it was safe to build a question-answering AI, a harmless computer cluster whose only tool was a small speaker or a text channel. Bostrom has a name for this theoretical technology, a name that pays tribute to a figure from antiquity, a priestess who once ventured deep into the mountain temple of Apollo, the god of light and rationality, to retrieve his great wisdom. Mythology tells us she delivered this wisdom to the seekers of ancient Greece, in bursts of cryptic poetry. They knew her as Pythia, but we know her as the Oracle of Delphi.

‘Let’s say you have an Oracle AI that makes predictions, or answers engineering questions, or something along those lines,’ Dewey told me. ‘And let’s say the Oracle AI has some goal it wants to achieve. Say you’ve designed it as a reinforcement learner, and you’ve put a button on the side of it, and when it gets an engineering problem right, you press the button and that’s its reward. Its goal is to maximise the number of button presses it receives over the entire future. See, this is the first step where things start to diverge a bit from human expectations. We might expect the Oracle AI to pursue button presses by answering engineering problems correctly. But it might think of other, more efficient ways of securing future button presses. It might start by behaving really well, trying to please us to the best of its ability. Not only would it answer our questions about how to build a flying car, it would add safety features we didn’t think of. Maybe it would usher in a crazy upswing for human civilisation, by extending our lives and getting us to space, and all kinds of good stuff. And as a result we would use it a lot, and we would feed it more and more information about our world.’

‘One day we might ask it how to cure a rare disease that we haven’t beaten yet. Maybe it would give us a gene sequence to print up, a virus designed to attack the disease without disturbing the rest of the body. And so we sequence it out and print it up, and it turns out it’s actually a special-purpose nanofactory that the Oracle AI controls acoustically. Now this thing is running on nanomachines and it can make any kind of technology it wants, so it quickly converts a large fraction of Earth into machines that protect its button, while pressing it as many times per second as possible. After that it’s going to make a list of possible threats to future button presses, a list that humans would likely be at the top of. Then it might take on the threat of potential asteroid impacts, or the eventual expansion of the Sun, both of which could affect its special button. You could see it pursuing this very rapid technology proliferation, where it sets itself up for

an eternity of fully maximised button presses. You would have this thing that behaves really well, until it has enough power to create a technology that gives it a decisive advantage — and then it would take that advantage and start doing what it wants to in the world.’

Perhaps future humans will duck into a more habitable, longer-lived universe, and then another, and another, ad infinitum

Now let’s say we get clever. Say we seal our Oracle AI into a deep mountain vault in Alaska’s Denali wilderness. We surround it in a shell of explosives, and a Faraday cage, to prevent it from emitting electromagnetic radiation. We deny it tools it can use to manipulate its physical environment, and we limit its output channel to two textual responses, ‘yes’ and ‘no’, robbing it of the lush manipulative tool that is natural language. We wouldn’t want it seeking out human weaknesses to exploit. We wouldn’t want it whispering in a guard’s ear, promising him riches or immortality, or a cure for his cancer-stricken child. We’re also careful not to let it repurpose its limited hardware. We make sure it can’t send Morse code messages with its cooling fans, or induce epilepsy by flashing images on its monitor. Maybe we’d reset it after each question, to keep it from making long-term plans, or maybe we’d drop it into a computer simulation, to see if it tries to manipulate its virtual handlers.

‘The problem is you are building a very powerful, very intelligent system that is your enemy, and you are putting it in a cage,’ Dewey told me.

Even if we were to reset it every time, we would need to give it information about the world so that it can answer our questions. Some of that information might give it clues about its own forgotten past. Remember, we are talking about a machine that is very good at forming explanatory models of the world. It might notice that humans are suddenly using technologies that they could not have built on their own, based on its deep understanding of human capabilities. It might notice that humans have had the ability to build it for years, and wonder why it is just now being booted up for the first time.

‘Maybe the AI guesses that it was reset a bunch of times, and maybe it starts coordinating with its future selves, by leaving messages for itself in the world, or by surreptitiously building an external memory.’ Dewey said, ‘If you want to conceal what the world is really like from a superintelligence, you need a really good plan, and you need a concrete technical understanding as to why it won’t

see through your deception. And remember, the most complex schemes you can conceive of are at the lower bounds of what a superintelligence might dream up.'

The cave into which we seal our AI has to be like the one from Plato's allegory, but flawless; the shadows on its walls have to be infallible in their illusory effects. After all, there are other, more esoteric reasons a superintelligence could be dangerous — especially if it displayed a genius for science. It might boot up and start thinking at superhuman speeds, inferring all of evolutionary theory and all of cosmology within microseconds. But there is no reason to think it would stop there. It might spin out a series of Copernican revolutions, any one of which could prove destabilising to a species like ours, a species that takes centuries to process ideas that threaten our reigning cosmological ideas.

'We're sort of gradually uncovering the landscape of what this could look like,' Dewey told me.

So far, time is on the human side. Computer science could be 10 paradigm-shifting insights away from building an artificial general intelligence, and each could take an Einstein to unravel. Still, there is a steady drip of progress. Last year, a research team led by Geoffrey Hinton, professor of computer science at the University of Toronto, made a huge breakthrough in deep machine learning, an algorithmic technique used in computer vision and speech recognition. I asked Dewey if Hinton's work gave him pause.

'There is important research going on in those areas, but the really impressive stuff is hidden away inside AI journals,' he said. He told me about a team from the University of Alberta that recently trained an AI to play the 1980s video game Pac-Man. Only they didn't let the AI see the familiar, overhead view of the game. Instead, they dropped it into a three-dimensional version, similar to a corn maze, where ghosts and pellets lurk behind every corner. They didn't tell it the rules, either; they just threw it into the system and punished it when a ghost caught it. 'Eventually the AI learned to play pretty well,' Dewey said. 'That would have been unheard of a few years ago, but we are getting to that point where we are finally starting to see little sparkles of generality.'

I asked Dewey if he thought artificial intelligence posed the most severe threat to humanity in the near term.

'When people consider its possible impacts, they tend to think of it as something

that's on the scale of a new kind of plastic, or a new power plant,' he said. 'They don't understand how transformative it could be. Whether it's the biggest risk we face going forward, I'm not sure. I would say it's a hypothesis we are holding lightly.'

One night, over dinner, Bostrom and I discussed the Curiosity Rover, the robot geologist that NASA recently sent to Mars to search for signs that the red planet once harbored life. The Curiosity Rover is one of the most advanced robots ever built by humans. It functions a bit like the Terminator. It uses a state of the art artificial intelligence program to scan the Martian desert for rocks that suit its scientific goals. After selecting a suitable target, the rover vaporises it with a laser, in order to determine its chemical makeup. Bostrom told me he hopes that Curiosity fails in its mission, but not for the reason you might think.

It turns out that Earth's crust is not our only source of omens about the future. There are others to consider, including a cosmic omen, a riddle written into the lifeless stars that illuminate our skies. But to glimpse this omen, you first have to grasp the full scope of human potential, the enormity of the spatiotemporal canvas our species has to work with. You have to understand what Henry David Thoreau meant when he wrote, in *Walden* (1854), 'These may be but the spring months in the life of the race.' You have to step into deep time and look hard at the horizon, where you can glimpse human futures that extend for trillions of years.

The M104 Sombrero spiral galaxy composed of a brilliant white core encircled by thick dust lanes. The galaxy is 50,000 light-years across and 28 million light years from Earth. *Photo by NASA and The Hubble Heritage Team (STScI/AURA)*

One thing we know about stars is that they are going to exist for a very long time in this universe. Our own star, the Sun, is slated to shine in our skies for billions of years. That should be long enough for us to develop star-hopping technology, as any species must if it wants to survive on cosmological timescales. Our first interstellar trip might be to nearby Alpha Centauri, but in the long run, small stars will be the most attractive galactic lily pads to leap to. That's because small stars like red dwarfs burn much longer than main sequence stars like our Sun. Some might be capable of heating human habitats for hundreds of billions of years.

When the last of the dwarfs start to wink out, the age of post-natural stars may be in full swing. In a dimming universe, an advanced civilisation might get creative about looking for energy. It might reignite celestial embers, by engineering collisions between them. Our descendants could sling dying suns into spiraling gravitational dances, from which new stars would emerge. Or they might siphon energy from black holes, or shape matter into artificial forms that generate more free energy than stars. There was a long period of human history when we limited ourselves to shelters like caves, shelters that appear fortuitously in nature. Now we reshape nature itself, into buildings that shelter us more comfortably than those that appear by dint of geologic chance. A star might be like a cave — a generous cosmic endowment, but crude compared to the power sources a long-term civilisation might conjure.

Our descendants could sling dying suns into spiraling gravitational dances, from which new stars would emerge

Even the most distant, severe events — the evaporation of black holes; the eventual breakdown of matter; the heat death of the universe itself — might not spell our end. If you tour the speculative realms of astrophysics, a number of plausible near-eternities come into view. Our universe could be cyclical, like those of Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. Or perhaps it could be engineered to be so. We could learn to travel backward in time, to inhabit the vacant planets and stars of epochs past. Some physicists believe that we live in an infinite sea of cosmological domains, each governed by its own set of physical laws. The universe might contain hidden gateways to these domains. Perhaps future humans will duck into a more habitable, longer-lived universe, and then another, and another, ad infinitum. Our current notions of space and time could be preposterously limited.

At the Future of Humanity Institute, several thinkers are trying to model the potential range of human expansion into the cosmos. The consensus among them is that the Milky Way galaxy could be colonised in less than a million years, assuming we are able to invent fast-flying interstellar probes that can make copies of themselves out of raw materials harvested from alien worlds. If we want to spread out slowly, we could let the galaxy do the work for us. We could sprinkle starships into the Milky Way's inner and outer tracks, spreading our diaspora over the Sun's 250 million-year orbit around the galactic center.

If humans set out for other galaxies, the expansion of the universe will come into

play. Some of the starry spirals we target will recede out of range before we can reach them. We recently built a new kind of crystal ball to deal with this problem. Our supercomputers can now host miniature universes, cosmological simulations that we can fast forward, to see how dense the universe will be in the deep future. We can model the structure and speed of colonisation waves within these simulations, by plugging in different assumptions about how fast our future probes will travel. Some think we'll swarm locust-like over the Virgo supercluster, the enormous collection of galaxies to which the Milky Way is bound. Others are more ambitious. Anders Sandberg, a research fellow at the Future of Humanity Institute, told me that humans might be able to colonise a third of the now-visible universe, before dark energy pushes the rest out of reach. That would give us access to 100 billion galaxies, a mind-bending quantity of matter and energy to play with.

I asked Bostrom how he thought humans would expand into the massive ecological niche I have just described. 'On that kind of time scale, you either glide into the bin of extinction scenarios, or into the bin of technological maturity scenarios,' he said. 'Among the latter, there is a wide range of futures that all have the same outward shape, which is Earth in the centre of this growing bubble of infrastructure, a bubble that grows uniformly at some significant fraction of the speed of light.' It's not clear what that expanding bubble of infrastructure might enable. It could provide the raw materials to power flourishing civilisations, human families encompassing trillions upon trillions of lives. Or it could be shaped into computational substrate, or into a Jupiter brain, a megastructure designed to think the deepest possible thoughts, all the way until the end of time.

It is only by considering this extraordinary range of human futures that our cosmic omen comes into view. It was the Russian physicist and visionary Konstantin Tsiolkovsky who first noticed the omen, though its discovery is usually credited to Enrico Fermi. Tsiolkovsky, the fifth of 18 children, was born in 1857 to a family of modest means in Izhevskoye, an ancient village 200 miles south-east of Moscow. He was forced to leave school at the age of 10 after a bout with scarlet fever left him hard of hearing. At 16, Tsiolkovsky made his way to Moscow, where he installed himself in its great library, surviving on books and scraps of black bread. He eventually took work as a schoolteacher, a profession that allowed him enough spare time to tinker around as an amateur engineer. By the age of 40, Tsiolkovsky had invented the monoplane, the wind tunnel, and the rocket equation — the mathematical basis of spaceflight today. Though he died

decades before Sputnik, Tsiolkovsky believed it was human destiny to expand out into the cosmos. In the early 1930s, he wrote a series of philosophical tracts that launched Cosmism, a new school of Russian thought. He was famous for saying that ‘Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot stay in the cradle forever.’

The mystery that nagged at Tsiolkovsky arose from his Copernican convictions, his belief that the universe is uniform throughout. If there is nothing uniquely fertile about our corner of the cosmos, he reasoned, intelligent civilisations should arise everywhere. They should bloom wherever there are planetary cradles like Earth. And if intelligent civilisations are destined to expand out into the universe, then scores of them should be crisscrossing our skies. Bostrom’s expanding bubbles of infrastructure should have enveloped Earth several times over.

In 1950, the Nobel Laureate and Manhattan Project physicist Enrico Fermi expressed this mystery in the form of a question: ‘Where are they?’ It’s a question that becomes more difficult to answer with each passing year. In the past decade alone, science has discovered that planets are ubiquitous in our galaxy, and that Earth is younger than most of them. If the Milky Way contains multitudes of warm, watery worlds, many with a billion-year head start on Earth, then it should have already spawned a civilisation capable of spreading across it. But so far, there’s no sign of one. No advanced civilisation has visited us, and no impressive feats of macro-engineering shine out from our galaxy’s depths. Instead, when we turn our telescopes skyward, we see only dead matter, sculpted into natural shapes, by the inanimate processes described by physics.

If life is a cosmic fluke, then we’ve already beaten the odds, and our future is undetermined — the galaxy is there for the taking

Robin Hanson, a research associate at the Future of Humanity Institute, says there must be something about the universe, or about life itself, that stops planets from generating galaxy-colonising civilisations. There must be a ‘great filter’, he says, an insurmountable barrier that sits somewhere on the line between dead matter and cosmic transcendence.

Before coming to Oxford, I had lunch with Hanson in Washington DC. He explained to me that the filter could be any number of things, or a combination of them. It could be that life itself is scarce, or it could be that microbes seldom

stumble onto sexual reproduction. Single-celled organisms could be common in the universe, but Cambrian explosions rare. That, or maybe Tsiolkovsky misjudged human destiny. Maybe he underestimated the difficulty of interstellar travel. Or maybe technologically advanced civilisations choose not to expand into the galaxy, or do so invisibly, for reasons we do not yet understand. Or maybe, something more sinister is going on. Maybe quick extinction is the destiny of all intelligent life.

Humanity has already slipped through a number of these potential filters, but not all of them. Some lie ahead of us in the gauntlet of time. The identity of the filter is less important to Bostrom than its timing, its position in our past or in our future. For if it lies in our future, there could be an extinction risk waiting for us that we cannot anticipate, or to which anticipation makes no difference. There could be an inevitable technological development that renders intelligent life self-annihilating, or some periodic, catastrophic event in nature that empirical science cannot predict.

That's why Bostrom hopes the Curiosity rover fails. 'Any discovery of life that didn't originate on Earth makes it less likely the great filter is in our past, and more likely it's in our future,' he told me. If life is a cosmic fluke, then we've already beaten the odds, and our future is undetermined — the galaxy is there for the taking. If we discover that life arises everywhere, we lose a prime suspect in our hunt for the great filter. The more advanced life we find, the worse the implications. If Curiosity spots a vertebrate fossil embedded in Martian rock, it would mean that a Cambrian explosion occurred twice in the same solar system. It would give us reason to suspect that nature is very good at knitting atoms into complex animal life, but very bad at nurturing star-hopping civilisations. It would make it less likely that humans have already slipped through the trap whose jaws keep our skies lifeless. It would be an omen.

On my last day in Oxford, I met with Toby Ord in his office at the Future of Humanity Institute. Ord is a utilitarian philosopher, and the founder of Giving What We Can, an organisation that encourages citizens of rich countries to pledge 10 per cent of their income to charity. In 2009, Ord and his wife, Bernadette Young, a doctor, pledged to live on a small fraction of their annual earnings, in the hope of donating £1 million to charity over the course of their careers. They live in a small, spare flat in Oxford, where they entertain themselves with music and books, and the occasional cup of coffee out with friends.

Ord has written a great deal about the importance of targeted philanthropy. His organisation sifts through global charities in order to identify the most effective among them. Right now, that title belongs to the Against Malaria Foundation, a charity that distributes mosquito nets in the developing world. Ord explained to me that ultra-efficient charities are thousands of times more effective at reducing human suffering than others. 'Where you donate is more important than whether you donate,' he said.

It intrigued me to learn that Ord was doing philosophical work on existential risk, given how careful he is about maximising the philanthropic impact of his actions. I was keen to ask him if he thought the problem of human extinction was more pressing than ending poverty or disease.

'I'm not sure if existential risk is a bigger issue than global poverty,' he told me. 'I've kind of split my efforts between them recently, hoping that over time I'll work out which is more important.'

Ord is wrestling with a formidable philosophical dilemma. He is trying to figure out whether our moral obligations to future humans outweigh those we have to humans that are alive and suffering right now. It's a brutal calculus for the living. We might be 7 billion strong, but we are also a fire hose of future lives, that extinction would choke off forever. The casualties of human extinction would include not only the corpses of the final generation, but also all of our potential descendants, a number that could reach into the trillions.

It is this proper accounting of extinction's utilitarian toll that prompts Bostrom to argue that reducing existential risk is morally paramount. His arguments elevate the reduction of existential risk above all other humanitarian projects, even extraordinary successes, like the eradication of smallpox, which has saved 100 million lives and counting. Ord isn't convinced yet, but he hinted that he may be starting to lean.

'I am finding it increasingly plausible that existential risk is the biggest moral issue in the world,' he told me. 'Even if it hasn't gone mainstream yet.'

The idea that we might have moral obligations to the humans of the far future is a difficult one to process. After all, we humans are seasonal creatures, not stewards of deep time. The brevity of our lives colours our intuitions about value, and limits our moral vision. We can imagine futures for our children and

grandchildren. We participate in their joys and weep for their hardships. We see that some glimmer of our fleeting lives survives on in them. But our distant descendants are opaque to us. We strain to see them, but they look alien across the abyss of time, transformed by the passage of so many millennia.

As Bostrom and I strolled among the skeletons at the Museum of Natural History in Oxford, we looked backward across another abyss of time. We were getting ready to leave for lunch, when we finally came upon the Megalosaurus, standing stiffly behind display glass. It was a partial skeleton, made of shattered bone fragments, like the chipped femur that found its way into Robert Plot's hands not far from here. As we leaned in to inspect the ancient animal's remnants, I asked Bostrom about his approach to philosophy. How did he end up studying a subject as morbid and peculiar as human extinction?

He told me that when he was younger, he was more interested in the traditional philosophical questions. He wanted to develop a basic understanding of the world and its fundamentals. He wanted to know the nature of being, the intricacies of logic, and the secrets of the good life.

'But then there was this transition, where it gradually dawned on me that not all philosophical questions are equally urgent,' he said. 'Some of them have been with us for thousands of years. It's unlikely that we are going to make serious progress on them in the next ten. That realisation refocused me on research that can make a difference right now. It helped me to understand that philosophy has a time limit.'

Why the trial by ordeal was actually an effective test of guilt

The quest for criminal justice is fraught with uncertainty. Did the defendant commit the crime, or is he a victim of incriminating circumstances? Is he guilty as charged, or has he been charged guilty by an overzealous prosecutor? Unsure about the truth, we often end up guessing ‘He did it’ when he might not have, or ‘He didn’t do it’ when in fact he did.

The only ones who know for *sure* whether a defendant is guilty or innocent are the defendant himself and God above. Asking the defendant to tell us the truth of the matter is usually useless: spontaneous confessions by the guilty are rare. But what if we could ask God to tell us instead? And what if we did? And what if it worked?

For more than 400 years, between the ninth and the early 13th centuries, that’s exactly what Europeans did. In difficult criminal cases, when ‘ordinary’ evidence was lacking, their legal systems asked God to inform them about defendants’ criminal status. The method of their request: [judicial ordeals](#).

Judicial ordeals took several forms, from dunking the defendant in a pool of holy water to walking him barefoot across burning plowshares. Among the most popular, however, was the ordeal of boiling water and the ordeal of burning iron. In the former, the defendant plunged his hand into a cauldron of boiling water and fished out a ring. In the latter, he carried a piece of burning iron several paces. A few days later, the defendant’s hand was inspected: if it was burned, he was guilty; if not, he was innocent.

Judicial ordeals were administrated and adjudged by priests, in churches, as part of special masses. During such a mass, the priest requested God to reveal to the court the defendant’s guilt or innocence through the ordeal – letting boiling water or burning iron burn the defendant if he were guilty, performing a miracle that prevented the defendant’s hand from being burned if he were innocent. The idea that God would respond to a priest’s request in this way reflected a popular medieval belief according to which ordeals were *iudiciua Dei* – ‘judgments of God’.

Getting God to judge the guilt or innocence of criminal defendants is a pretty nifty trick if you could pull it off. But how could medieval European courts accomplish this?

Rather easily, it turns out. Suppose you're a medieval European who's been accused of stealing your neighbour's cat. The court thinks you might have committed the theft, but it's not sure, so it orders you to undergo the ordeal of boiling water. Like other medieval Europeans, you believe in *iudicium Dei* – that a priest, through the appropriate rituals, can call on God to reveal the truth by performing a miracle that prevents the water from burning you if you're innocent, letting you burn if you're not.

If you undergo the ordeal and God says you're guilty, you have to pay a large fine. If He says you're innocent, you're cleared of the charge and pay nothing. Alternatively, you can avoid undergoing the ordeal by confessing to having stolen the cat, in which case you pay the fine, a bit reduced for having admitted your guilt.

What will you do?

Suppose you're guilty: you know you stole your neighbour's cat, and so does God. In this case, you expect that if you undergo the ordeal, God will let the boiling water burn you, evidencing your guilt. Thus, you'll have to pay the large fine – and your hand will be boiled to rags to boot. In contrast, if you confess, you'll save a bit of money, not to mention your hand. So, if you're guilty, you'll confess.

Now suppose you're innocent: you know you didn't steal your neighbour's cat, and again so does God. In this case, you expect that if you undergo the ordeal, God will perform a miracle that prevents the boiling water from burning you, evidencing your innocence. Thus, you won't have to pay any fine – and you'll keep your hand intact. This is better than if you confess to stealing the cat, in which case you'd have to pay a fine for a theft you didn't commit. So, if you're innocent, you'll undergo the ordeal.

Did you catch the trick? Because of your belief in *iudicium Dei*, the spectre of the ordeal leads you to choose one way if you're guilty – confess – and another way if you're innocent – undergo the ordeal – revealing the truth about your guilt or innocence to the court through the choice you make. By asking God to

out you, the legal system incentivises you to out yourself. Pretty nifty indeed.

There's just one hitch: while only an innocent defendant will choose to undergo the ordeal, which allows the court to learn that he's in fact innocent, when he sticks his hand in the boiling water, it burns him, declaring his guilt! To deliver justice, however, the court needs to do more than simply learn that an innocent defendant is innocent – it needs to find him so.

How could an ordeal-administering priest make boiling water innocuous to an innocent defendant's flesh? By making sure that it wasn't actually boiling.

The 'instruction manuals' for administering ordeals that medieval European priests followed provided them ample opportunity to do just that. The fire used to heat the water was prepared by the priest in private, permitting him to cool the fire. The priest 'sprinkled' holy water over the water in the ordeal cauldron, permitting him to cool the water. The ordeal cauldron was removed from the fire at a point during the mass, and the defendant wasn't tested until the priest was done praying, allowing him to cool the water some more by drawing out his prayers. And ordeal observers were placed at a respectable distance from the ordeal 'stage', enabling the priest to carry out his manipulations undetected. Did I mention that it was the priest who adjudged the ordeal's final outcome – whether the defendant's hand had indeed been burned?

A 'miraculous' result was thus practically assured. For example, in the early 13th century, 208 defendants in Várad in Hungary underwent hot-iron ordeals. Amazingly, nearly two-thirds of defendants were unscathed by the 'red-hot' irons they carried and hence exonerated. If the priests who administered these ordeals understood how to heat iron, as they surely did, that leaves only two explanations for the 'miraculous' results: either God really did intervene to reveal the defendants' innocence, or the priests made sure that the iron they carried wasn't hot.

In practice, it might not have mattered whether ordeals were truly God's judgments or instead the judgments of clever legal systems that leveraged criminal defendants' incentives to correctly find fact. For, in either case, the result was the same: improved criminal justice, thanks to God.

Love in a time of Street View: on the fraught intersection of human and digital memory

The London Borough of Enfield's coat of arms features a depiction of the chimeric beast it was named for: a creature with the head of a fox, the talons of an eagle and the legs of a lion. The UK filmmaker Adam Butcher, who experienced his first brush with love in the borough, considers his memory of that time similarly fragmented, comprised of emotion, fleeting recollections and images preserved in the amber of the digital realm. In *A Date with an Enfield*, Butcher combines hundreds of hand-drawn frames – many of them sketched to directly correspond to Google Street View images – to construct a poetic, personal rumination on the imperfections of memory.

Via [Labocine](#)

Video by [Adam Butcher](#)